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Withyford

Arthur O. Fisher, George Denholm Armour, Robert Hugh Buxton

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HOUNDS AND STAG FIGHTING IN THE WATER.

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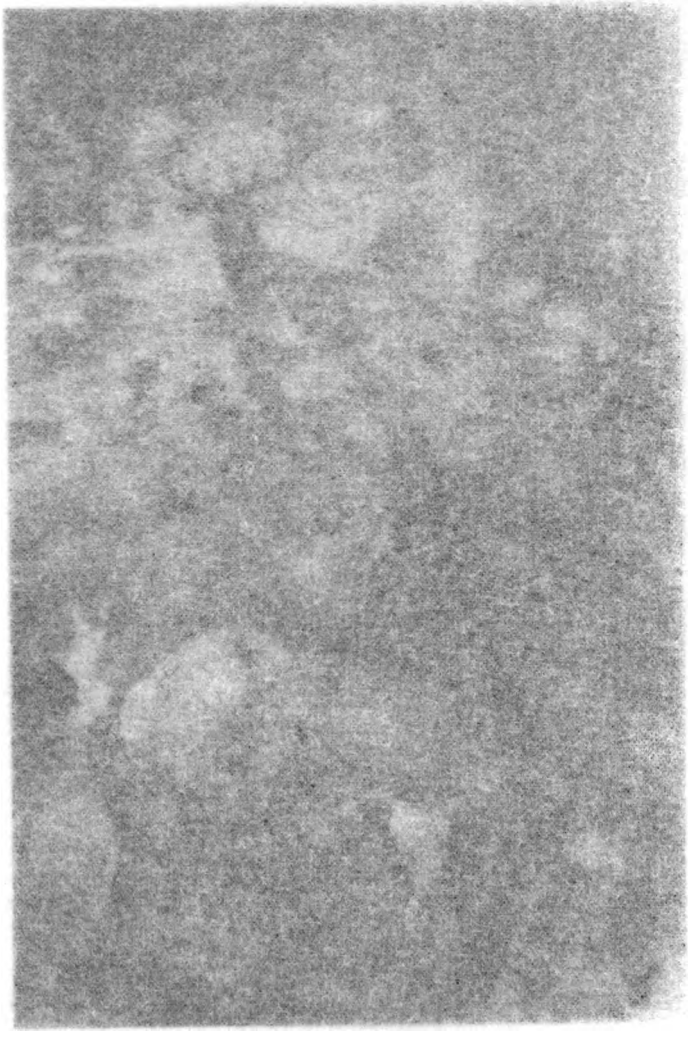

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WITHYFORD

AN EXMOOR STORY

BY

ARTHUR O. FISHER

WITH FRONTISPIECE BY G. D. ARMOUR
AND FIVE ILLUSTRATIONS BY R. H. BUXTON

LONDON
CHATTO & WINDUS
1908

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AT THE FEET OF

ORFLA

I LAY THIS LITTLE BOOK

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THE OLD BLACK STAG

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WITHYFORD

CHAPTER I

HOME, SWEET HOME

"Where the purple moor is stretching ever westward to the sea,
And the hurty-pickers settin', picking hurties* o'er the lea,
And the master's horn be blowin', o! it's there that I would be,
Where the purple moor is stretching ever westward to the sea."

A. O. F.

"I BE the best visherman this side of the country, save my brother Villum, and he have a longer arm than wot I got," was the unblushing remark of Jem Clatworthy, as he displayed a basket of freshly caught trout. "Them be beauties, they be, and I brought un for 'ee, miss, 'cos I says to my good wuman as how you should have trout for breakfast the first marnin' you come home."

* "Hurties": local name for whortleberries, the picking of which is quite an industry.

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"Well, Jem, it is good of you, and I am glad to be home; but tell me," said the young lady, "you didn't catch all these with a fly?"

"No, miss," said he slyly, "but it be like this: there bain't no w-a-ater in the river, and vishing with a fly be a terrible waste of time now-abouts."

The recipient of the gift, Molly Farquharson, had arrived home the previous night from a "finishing" school in London, and was now to settle down at home for good.

Her mother had died when she was quite a child, and her father since then had lived the life of a recluse, and grown hard in the contemplation of his own loneliness. Falling rents had compelled him to abandon the upkeep of the Manor, and he had removed into a comfortable old Dower House, with a battered appearance, tucked away in the folds of the wild moorland hills which surrounded it.

Nature seemed to have adopted this old house, and shaded it into the landscape. Years of storms and hard weather had eaten into the old stone, and had given it a grey neutral tint.

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"Looks as crumbly as the outside of an old Stilton," said Molly in one of her irreverent moments; but she was deeply attached to her home, and only too glad to be once more among its old familiar surroundings.

It was a relief to turn from the embarrassing subject of the obviously tickled trout, so she asked Jem what news there was in the village.

"There be a new p'leeceman," said he; and he looked as if he could have said more on this topic, but the appearance of a half-crown changed his thoughts.

"Thank 'ee kindly, miss," he remarked, "and I wish 'ee good marnin'."

Then Molly's thoughts turned to breakfast, and after she had done full justice to the grilled trout, she felt it was good to be back in the land of clotted cream and hurties again.

She lingered some time over her breakfast, till she remembered that the kennels must be visited the first morning of her arrival home. So she ordered out the old white pony, and was soon jogging along the path she knew so well that led "up

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over" and across the moor to the kennels.

The sun was stifling hot down in the valley, but cool currents of air greeted her as she reached the open moor above, breezes wafted inland from the ocean, and as cool as sea-shells.

In front, as far as the eye could reach, stretched hills of purple heather fold upon fold.

Glancing back upon the green valleys below, the hedge-bound fields were dwarfed in their perspective to sheep-pens, over which the drifting clouds threw idle shadows that hovered and chased each other.

Presently Molly hit the moorland road, which led down to the village in the hollow; and half-way up the next coomb were the kennel cottages and buildings, looking as white and as clean as a coast-guard station.

Benjamin, the huntsman, pretended it was quite a surprise visit; but, as a matter of fact, he had been arranging things with a view to their looking neat but natural all the morning.

"Well, Benjamin," she said, "I have come back."

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"THEY BE ALL VERY LOVIN', MISS."

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"Yes, miss, and I did so wesh for 'ee to come; you be pleased to step inside, miss. We's huntin' three days a week now, for deer be terrible plenty. I say to Maaster, I can hunt four days a week, I can, but I can't go for to sing in the choir a Sunday when I been hollerin' to my hounds all Saturday."

To change what was evidently a sore subject, Molly pointed to a hound-skin which looked partially cured, and made a most effectual antimacassar in its protection of the best arm-chair.

"Oh, I could 'a cried about un," said Benjamin. "He was such a promising young hound; he rinned right in, and the deer got un on the brow antler. Maaster was terrible upset about un, and so was I."

A chorus of eager voices greeted the visitor when the kennel door was thrown open, and cold noses were pressed against her with impatient curiosity.

"They be all very lovin', miss—all very lovin'," said Benjamin reassuringly, at the same time tapping around freely with the handle of his whip. "Geet baak! Geet baak! Jupiter, Rallywood, y'old twoad!"

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At last they were all benched, and they stood in rows with wistful faces and affected attitudes, jealous of individual notice as the very ladies of the *corps de ballet.*

It was from the huntsman that Molly heard for the first time of the American gentleman, Mr. Potts, who had come to live at the Manor, which had been empty for so long; and she wondered why she had not been told anything about her father's new tenant.

"I don't think he be much of a sportsman, miss, but he seems a nice gentleman; and they dew say as he have a power o' money, which is wanted terrible bad in these parts."

Molly refrained from asking the huntsman any questions; but as she rode home her thoughts were much engrossed with speculations as to what the new tenant would prove to be like. What did the family consist of, and would she have any companions of her own age? Though she had only seen her father for a short time since her arrival, why had he said nothing, and thus created an air of mystery over the new tenant?

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She meant to set all doubts at rest on these points without loss of time, so, on arriving home, she gave the white pony to a stable-lad, and promptly went to seek her father.

"T' old Squire," to give him his familiar name, was in his particular den studying the design of a new boot to fit the ancient ram who Molly always declared had gout in his foot.

As his daughter burst into the room, with a note of interrogation on her face, he suspected the cause.

"Oh, father, who is Mr. Potts? Why haven't you told me all about him?"

"Well, my dear, it is a little surprise; and as he is coming to lunch, you can judge for yourself. I think I hear the bell now." Whereupon Molly darted away, and reached her own room by a circuitous route of dark passages at the back of the house.

When she came down to luncheon, she had changed her habit for a morning frock fashioned in cunning simplicity, and even her father noticed how beautiful she had grown.

Mr. Cyrus Potts, of the U.S.A., meta-

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phorically drew in his breath with a hiss. He was a susceptible bachelor, and had not expected to meet such beauty in what he termed a world-forgotten spot. The only point that worried him was how to make a good approach; the bow she had given him on introduction was distinctly stiff. Had it been an American girl of his own set, he would have chaffed her straight away, and the ice would have been broken.

Womanlike, Molly noted his entire appearance at one glance, without apparently even looking at him. She was conscious that the hair was parted down the middle, the face had a white and puffed appearance, and that there was an abnormal width of collar displayed.

There were no snobbish ideas, however, about Mr. Potts; he just confided to the girl that he was in the dry-goods trade, and, in partnership with another man, had made a corner and a pile, and then, in his enthusiasm for his business, hoped she just followed him as he laid bare the hidden mysteries of City finance and the ethics of bulls and bears.

Molly's worldly horizon was extremely

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limited, and her visions of Americans did not extend beyond the "Virginian" types of romance, who brought with them the wild free life of the prairie and a knowledge of bucking bronchos — experiences which would have been so usefully employed on a wild colt she intended breaking.

This city type of American she had never contemplated, and in her disappointment she looked coldly on him.

Cyrus saw that if this luncheon party was not going to lapse into monosyllables, he had got to do the talking, and he rose to the occasion like a man, and launched into a topic uppermost in his mind. He no doubt appreciated the unspoilt grandeur of this old-world corner of England; but, whether from unselfish or purely commercial motives, he was restless to share its beauty with others; so he turned to Mr. Farquharson, and in all earnestness inquired if there were no means of "getting the railway and booming this country."

T' old Squire snorted in his amazement and shook his head. Molly threw herself into the breach.

"Do you mean attract tourists?" she

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said. "Oh, father simply hates them; they scatter broken glass in the heather, which leads to fearful accidents, and they leave gates open, and the cattle stray. Sometimes they do come in the summer, and then they are just a nuisance."

Cyrus felt depressed. This was not quite what he meant, but he knew it hopeless to continue any further on this subject.

Conversation flagged a little after this *cul-de-sac*, and Cyrus took the first opportunity that presented itself to make his adieu. As he drove home to the Manor, he felt that the girl, in spite of being so very English, attracted him. She might have been one of the beautiful heroines he had read of in old English books, and in his mind he wove an atmosphere of romance about her which he decided was genuinely antique.

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CHAPTER II

TATTERSALLS

"You were reared in the creed of your fathers,
And schooled into what you should do,
In riding to hounds or in working a shoot,
And things better hidden from you.

"Soon the eye and the hand took the training,
The love of sport held you strong,
Before finding that life was not pleasure,
And, somehow, you'd started all wrong."

A. O. F.

"WHAT a dull place London would be without horses!" soliloquized Dick Foster, as he picked out a smart hansom from Cornhill. Tattersalls was the order. "And now for a holiday," said he, "out of this beastly City." Dick Foster had spent many weary months of close attendance in the thrice-breathed air of the Stock Exchange, and, having made an extra coup of a couple of hundred odd, he wisely decided to close his book and take a holiday.

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Dick had hoped very much, as a boy, to go into the army when his time came; but when his time did come, circumstances intervened, as they have a knack of doing sometimes.

"The army is a very pleasant idea, my boy," said his father, "but I simply can't afford it; what you have got to do is to make money for yourself, and you won't do that in the army, if you stay there till you are bald-headed."

A strong love of horses was the leaven of his existence so far, and the wholesomeness of the life he led was reflected in his clear-cut face and hard, lean figure.

By dint of early rides in the morning before going to his work, he managed to keep sufficiently fit to thoroughly enjoy the one day's hunting a week which he always made superhuman efforts to secure.

Now a lucky chance had given him a good holiday in the early autumn, and his thoughts turned to stag and the West Country.

It was not to be thought of that he should take his best hunter down, to be knocked up with the hard ground and long days,

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as he would have no time to rest him again before the fox-hunting began ; he therefore decided to take his hack with him, and buy a couple of useful ones that he could work hard and sell again when he had finished with them. He knew something about two which were to be sold at Tattersalls', so he determined to go and see them; and it was on this pleasant errand that he hailed a cab in Cornhill that afternoon.

As there were no special features in the approaching sale on the morrow, there was no crowd in attendance to hamper him; but the faint, compressed atmosphere of stable seemed to be more compressed than usual on this hot afternoon.

Dick dodged his way through the usual knot of lookers-on, and lost no time in finding a "runner."

"Certainly, sir, I know where they are," said the smart official.

"Let us have the chestnut out first where I can see her," suggested Dick. She proved to be a good-looking mare about 14·3, but with a ewe neck. Dick thought of Ben Morgan's idea of the height of misery

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—*i.e.*, galloping downhill on a ewe-necked horse, with his nose up in the air and a fly in your eye. However, he was not to be daunted by trifles; there were very good shoulders, which are most necessary if you are to get down Devonshire coombs quickly; he also noted she was let down behind like a greyhound, which ought to mean both pace and power.

He said nothing of his thoughts, which were hidden in that all-absorbing stare of the connoisseur. On the principle of "however good her top, she can't fly," he began his examination with the feet. These were satisfactory and cool as paving-stones, he mused, and about as solid; then he felt carefully round the coronet—nothing abnormal, no sidebone—and so on up the leg; a splint well placed he disregarded. The hocks were a little coarse, but no harm there; a glance at the corner tooth revealed the age of five. Then, standing the mare facing the light, and shading the side of her eye, he searched carefully for that tiny bluish-white speck that means so much. However, he could discover nothing amiss with her eyes, and, after seeing her ridden,

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and that she moved well and sound, he decided she was worth risking.

The second was a bay horse, and that went through a similar examination. The shoulder was not quite so sloping in this case, but the action would be compensated for to some extent by good sloping pasterns; besides which, his head was put on the right way, and he had lots in front of the saddle.

They both looked as if they could gallop and stay, and altogether Dick thought he had found just what he wanted. He was not going to let them slip through his fingers for the sake of a pound or two, so, in making his arrangements for some one to bid for him, he left a good limit, which he hoped they would not exceed.

His idea was to take them straight down to Exmoor with his own horse, after the sale on the following day.

Meanwhile there were a few sporting accessories to be bought for the trip. He thought he needed a new hunting-flask; one that would hold a long light drink seemed advisable for hot weather, in a country where the days were long ones and

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inns an unknown quantity. Then there were spur-straps, a thong and lash, hunting-stocks, and innumerable small items, which all required to be bought at the right shops, which hunting-men seem to know by instinct. Dick thought he had not done a bad afternoon's work at Tattersalls'; the more he considered the matter the more satisfied he became. He felt he had already begun his holiday, and as he sat back in one of London's gondolas his thoughts had already flown to Exmoor and the little thatched inn which nestled in the folds of those lovely heather-clad hills.

Many years ago, when he was a boy, his father used to take him down to hunt from this inn. How well he remembered it all—the thatched front porch and the posts and chains round the small flower-beds under the front windows! The three lime-washed loose-boxes, too, the smallest of which always fell to the lot of his pony-hunter Sea-breeze.

Poor Sea-breeze! What a hero he was then, and so very real that it seemed odd to think of him now as only a memory! Nevertheless, the boxes remained, and it

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was a comforting thought that he was going to fill them with his own horses after all these years.

It was quite an anxious morning for Dick, till the horses, which he already regarded with an eye of ownership, were actually knocked down to him at the sale.

He lost no time in getting them clothed and taken over to Paddington, where his own horse was awaiting them, and when they were all there, comfortably boxed, he began to feel more settled. Of course he was buying a pig in a poke to some extent, and by taking them straight away from London it would be impossible to return them within the time limit, should there be anything radically wrong. Still, he must risk something, and thought he might as well risk it all.

As he settled himself down in an empty first-class carriage, with plenty of his favourite literature within easy reach, and a carefully packed picnic-basket in the rack, he felt at peace with the whole world, and with himself in particular. The train glided smoothly out of the station, and he realized he was at last launched on his

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holiday, and gave himself up to rosy visions of the sport that was in store for him.

He was soon out of the rattle of the walled-in track, once more in the open with the silent fields and the fresh air. How good it all seemed!

By the aid of a favourite magazine and a long break for refreshments, the hours soon passed, and he was surprised to find himself at Tarnton, a station of grateful memory. It was here he changed to a small local train that was to take him to his destination, over what always seemed to him in the past years rather a switch-back course.

The little engine strained and panted up the hills, like a cockney rising to his aspirates. Although it was quite dusk now, he could just make out the light flashes of the rushing streams below him; then the coombs rose up on each side of the train, and the little horned sheep were huddled together on the grass slopes above, and in at the open window came the sweet scent of the warm red earth.

The train stopped at a succession of quaint little stations till by the dim light

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of a very oily lamp Dick read "Mulworthy" in cramped letters on the glass, and he knew he had got to the end of his railway journey at least. There were still fourteen up and down miles to be done over the moor before he reached the Old Oak Inn at Withyford, and he was pleased to see a small wagonette with two horses had been sent to meet him. His own horses and his man were to put up near at hand for the night, and to come out in the morning to Withyford.

The porter having piled the luggage into the wagonette, Dick took his seat by the side of the driver, and they started out into the now black night.

In the narrow lanes, where the growth on the high banks met overhead, the darkness was of that density that candle-lamps only created visionary obstructions in the path, and caused substances to look like shadows. The driver, however, didn't seem concerned with these things at all, but dozed at intervals, from which he awoke with an upward tug at the reins. It appeared to Dick as if the dreamer was fishing, and the climax of the bite jerked him into consciousness each time.

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It was only at a walking pace they could crawl their way up the winding lanes that lead to the moor. By the time they reached the high ground there was more light, and in the clear altitude the stars shone like jewels. Presently a young, pale moon came in view above the rim of the valley, and lighted up the long white road that lies like a ribbon across the dark hills. The horses jerked for a moment out of their stride as the dusky form of a huge stag flitted across in front of them—no doubt on his way to the feeding-grounds, and the carriage lights had startled him. Swiftly and silently he moved, like a ghost, till lost in the dark shadow of the lower coomb.

London seemed far enough away now to Dick, and visionary like some bad day-dream. A rasping sound on the wheel broke in upon his thoughts. The carriage was going downhill at last, and the driver had got the brake on hard.

Down below Dick could just make out the thatched gables of the inn-roof—a very welcome sight. Meanwhile the wagonette was swaying from side to side in its descent.

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The only reason the horses kept on their legs was that, owing to the pace, they were frightened to fall—at least, this was what Dick in his thankfulness surmised as they pulled up at the inn-door in safety.

The worthy proprietor of the inn, Mr. Feathers, after the old-fashioned custom, came to the door to greet his guest.

"I don't know as 'ow I should 'a knowed 'ee, sir, you have growed so. You be pleased to come and see your room, sir, and I'll have dinner ready in ten minutes, I will."

Dick was enchanted with it all. His was a long low room with a black oak beam across the ceiling. The old furniture looked quaint and restful, and in itself suggested slumber, or rather that deliciously reposeful state of mind that exists between being called in the morning and the absolute necessity of getting out of bed, when one's thoughts wander in pleasant bypaths.

Mrs. Feathers followed on the heels of Dick, and informed him she had left the window open, because she knew what gentlemen liked. It was not long before he was doing ample justice to a dinner in

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which roast chicken and grilled tomatoes were the chief features of the menu. This was followed by a reflective pipe or two, and then the night's rest that awaits a faultless digestion as well as an easy conscience.

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CHAPTER III

"HOUNDS, GENTLEMEN, PLEASE"

"Ah! it's many a time on the hill-side
You've watched the hounds drawing below,
When catching the first faintest whimper,
You'd snatch at your bridle and go.

"Why, you know the game better than I do,
On the tops of your toes to the Meet
You would just pick your steps like a lady,
And the way you would jump was a treat."
A. O. F.: *To an Old Mare.*

MR. CYRUS POTTS had a magnificent stud of hunters. He had wisely put the matter of horses in the hands of some one who knew what was required for the country, and he got them regardless of price. These horses were a considerable source of pride to him, and looks of approval which were cast at them the rider often attributed to himself, as being caused by his own "high-grade appearance" in the saddle.

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As a matter of fact, Cyrus was not cut out by nature for a horseman, or the gods would not have furnished him with short, round legs, and made good the deficiency in length by a long back above the saddle.

His was a typically bad seat; there was something about his knees that wouldn't bend into the saddle; and so big was he below the knee, his feet turned up away from the horse, and his brown Butcher boots looked like flower-pots.

On the morning in question Molly noted all this with much disfavour.

Cyrus had invited the foxhounds to meet at the Manor, and had written offering to lend Molly one of his best hunters for the occasion. This offer her father had urged her to accept, and she had accordingly done so. Nevertheless, she did not see why Jane, her white pony, should not have done quite well, seeing they were only cubbing, and nothing to jump but a few banks on the moor.

When she was mounted on the pride of Cyrus Potts's stud—a grey mare of faultless shape—she altered her opinion slightly about Jane being good enough. It was

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such a delight to handle a horse that moved under her with such light-heartedness and with the manners of a curate, too, she soliloquized.

This was Mr. Cyrus Potts's first experience of entertaining the hunt, and he was most anxious that everything should be done in all correctness. He had not been able to grasp quite the delicate distinctions between a late cubbing and a fox-hunting meet, and therefore cherry brandy and sandwiches made their due appearance at eight o'clock, and, to use the sporting parlance of the master, "found few takers." Indeed, Mr. Crow, the master, was not wont to set much store on entertaining, but considered it pure waste of time. For this reason he usually preferred the cross-roads, but, partly from good nature and partly from the liberal subscription he had received, made an exception in favour of the new tenant on this occasion.

Mr. Potts, with crisp phrases of jocularity, was making himself most affable to his miscellaneous collection of guests, urging them all with one accord to get off

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their horses and come in, which no one seemed inclined to do.

At last the master, thinking he had spent enough of the morning at the shrine of politeness, made a move, and took his hounds down the long Manor drive out on to the moorland common. On this common were some little farm homesteads dotted about, from which quarter he had lately received many poorly-spelt epistles of complaint about the audacity of the foxes and their penchant for pullets, which, funnily enough, were all about to lay.

Complaints in the form of messages might be discounted to some extent; but he knew when his good folk were moved to put their pens to paper they must indeed be labouring under the sense of some grievous wrong. He therefore determined to do what he could to remedy it.

All one side of the steep valley was clothed with thick gorse, through which the sheep had made little wriggling tracks over the broken turf. The master stopped for an instant, just rounded up his hounds, and then waved them in.

The field were obliged to go in single file

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in the narrow track that led along the rim of the steep valley. Cyrus's blood-horse, which had been "tittuping" every inch of the road and refusing any settled pace, now moved with the agility of a step-dancer, as the intersecting gorse pricked his legs; sometimes he would stop and jump stray pieces at unexpected moments in a way that Cyrus found most disconcerting, and, indeed, there were frequently glimpses of the horizon to be seen between him and the saddle on the occasion of these unexpected little buck-jumps. He had quite made up his mind that, if they found, he was not going to charge down that steep, if his horse could be induced to leave the others and go round. Indeed, it was not an inviting place to get down with an excited horse maddened by the sight of a pack of hounds in full view going away from him up the opposite hill.

Hounds were working every inch of the gorse, and not a sound came. It was quite clear to the master the colony of cubs he hoped to rattle in all directions were not at home. He was about to put the horn to his lips to blow "Hounds out," when there

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was a yell from an excited farmer down at the bottom of the coomb. The new Entry threw up their heads at once in a bewildered way; luckily this was followed by the eager, bell-like tones of an old hound down at the bottom, and they raced to it. "H-i-i-ck together" came from the whip, and his quick thong purged a puppy of his unbelief in a twinkling.

The master, not knowing where the cub was going to break, begged his field to hold hard for one moment; meanwhile the shut-in valley rang with the clamour of hounds, and horses pawed the turf and trembled in their excitement. They were not kept long in doubt; an old fox, as big as a collie dog, was seen boring his way at a gallop between the furze on the opposite hill.

The second whip moved down to stop hounds, but the master signalled to him to let them go, and go they did, screaming like furies. The music was much too good to last, and it died down a little as they topped the rise.

Molly's mare looked as if she would like to fly the valley, but by judicious handling

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HIS QUICK THONG PURGED A PUPPY OF HIS UNBELIEF.

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she was induced to go straight in her descent, and not sideways, Molly knowing full well that a slip to a horse in a slanting position meant rolling down to the bottom.

At last she was safely down the valley, only to find that the fox had turned along the top of the opposite hill, and was making for the head of the coomb. She was now not far behind hounds which were going parallel to her, and simply racing on the grass above.

She reflected how well the mare was galloping under her hand, and felt herself to be quite the mistress of the situation now. Presently the voice of Cyrus behind said:

"Well, Miss Farquharson, I wasn't going down that place like a fly on the wall, but I've got here just the same."

"Headed," was the short explanation of his luck that she flung to him over her shoulder.

If the fox was headed, he had a good point as an alternative; for he had scorned the wooded valleys, and was now making the pace a cracker over the open heather. There were no rabbit-holes to speak of; a

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concealed "grip" accounted for the whip, but it was "wunnerful soft fallin'," and he scrambled on again, and set his horse going in no time.

They had been running now for twenty minutes, without the semblance of a check, and hounds were still ahead, and simply driving their fox. Where a few little horned sheep had foiled the scent, the pack was seen to open out like a fan for a moment, as the wise ones came to the front; then they drove to the right, the formation changed again, and they swept on as before.

Molly's whole being thrilled in the mad excitement of the chase; surely life had nothing better to offer than the glorious intoxication of such a gallop. Ride as she would, she could not reduce the distance between herself and that flying pack.

They had run now over the wide expanse of Blackerton Moor, and were once more on the brink of the enclosed country. The first obstacle was a nasty bank, with a ditch on the take-off side, overgrown and blind with brambles. Molly chose a place where two stiff rails did duty for a gate, and, pulling her mare into a trot, she went

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slowly up to them and popped over. Some of the farmers, whose mounts were not exactly used to timber, breathlessly dismounted, and scrambled down the ditch and up the bank, their horses following with an impatience that often bundled their owners unceremoniously down the other side. In an incredibly short time they were all mounted again and spurring on valiantly to the front.

The fox was beginning to run short now and double, but the pack were too close to him for his wiles to be successful, and they pushed him out in the open once more.

An intervening hill now hid the chase from view, and the field rode eagerly to see what the summit would reveal. Hounds were in the same field with their fox; closer and closer they drew, till Gannymede and Chorister were snapping at his brush. In a moment it was all over; a rolling, growling mass of hounds, "Whoo-op!" and the master was off his horse and among them. No necessity to hold his hunter for the moment; there it stood, with outstretched neck and legs wide apart, while

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the short docked tail seemed to twitch in unison with its rapid pulses.

Molly, too, was off her hunter, standing her with head up to the wind, and in less than two minutes the mare was impatient to be moving again, but Molly meant to walk her straight home after such a morning.

The master, Mr. Crow, was not a courtier in speech, though Molly thought him one in deed, when he handed her the brush, with a few complimentary words.

Cyrus arrived before the fox was broken up, and, after an earnest conclave with the whip, he emerged triumphantly with a pad.

As they rode home together Molly thanked him enthusiastically for the loan of the good grey.

She meant to be very nice to him indeed, and there was a glow of admiration in Cyrus's expression as he listened. The gates of her home were now in view, and Molly had an intuitive feeling that Cyrus was working up to a sentimental good-bye, so she hastily changed the subject to the long brush which was tied to her saddle.

Cyrus dived into his coat-tail pocket, and produced his pad with much pride.

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"Now, this is what I call a cheap trophy," said he; "I only gave the whip a sovereign for it."

"A sovereign!" said Molly, with a look of arch simplicity. "I *do* think they might have given you the whole fox for that."

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CHAPTER IV

THE BROWN BIRDS

" Remember my first partridge day ?
That I shall ever do.
I hear the solemn keeper say,
' Don't you shoot *at* him, Master A. ;
Shoot where 'e's going to !' "

A. O. F.

In the morning the hard knuckles of John, the valet at the Old Oak, summoned Dick from the land of dreams. The formal tapping was followed by a series of hollow-sounding blows, as an unwieldy tub was bundled into his bedroom. This was accompanied by a strong smell of stable, which the valet had acquired in his dual capacity of ostler.

To senses not yet blunted by tobacco this odour seemed the most forcible feature in the awakening.

Dick, from under his half-closed eyelids, was delighted to watch this honest func-

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tionary now staggering with two huge cans of water, which he had filled from the Exe. These he poured into the tub with noise enough for a cataract; then he stumped about, shaking the room, and finally drew up the blind and departed. Soon the air became fragrant with the promise of grilled ham, and Dick rose to meet it. He had just finished his breakfast when the clatter of horses' feet on the cobbles of the yard apprised him of the fact that his horses had come in, so he strolled out to inspect them.

"How did they behave on the moor, Johnson?"

"Come along a treat, sir," said the enthusiastic cockney groom.

When he had seen them rubbed down after their fourteen-mile ride, Dick's thoughts turned to a programme for the day.

Mr. Feathers wished to know if he would be pleased to come with him and look for partridges on some rough ground he owned. Dick, nothing loath, promptly unpacked his gun, and in five minutes was ready to start. As the ground was chiefly thick

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cover of bracken and gorse, the services of Duke the setter were necessary. Duke was a red setter of a faded and second-hand appearance, who spent his days dreaming about the stable-yard, except when he was very wet, when he slept on the carriage cushions. The sight of a gun, however, galvanized him into a state of wild hilarity, which was only to be controlled by constant cuffing on the part of Mr. Feathers, whenever he came within reach.

The day promised to be a very hot one, and John was told off to carry a small jar of beer, apparently for the worthy host's special benefit, he being very stout, and liable to sudden thirst.

Mr. Feathers was a good shot at his own particular kind of shooting. He liked birds to get up at his feet, and didn't even wait for them to get into "cocking distance." He just banged at them as soon as he saw them.

Dick was horrified to see him using his gun at one moment as an alpenstock, with the butt on the ground to help him up a steep bank. Dick pointed out unpleasant results might follow. Mr. Feathers looked

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bewildered for one instant, and altered the gun to half-cock.

With this slight modification they continued their way up to the top of the hill, when Duke ran into his first covey of birds without the formality of pointing. Mr. Feathers, who was panting like a sheep from his exertions, pulled wildly at the locked triggers; then he looked blankly at his gun, and said in his despair, "I'll go home, sir, I will." He was, however induced to reconsider this, and solaced himself with a glass of beer.

Then his wrath turned to the culprit, Duke, who was lucky enough to be well out of earshot galloping after fresh conquests in the far distance.

It was some time before he could be induced to return, and his owner displayed a command of varied and startling epithets to suit the occasion.

At last he came to heel with bowed head and lolling tongue, only to receive severe cuffing.

After this he seemed to settle down considerably, and worked admirably within gunshot every inch of the ground.

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Mr. Feathers had just remarked, "He can do it when he likes," when Duke found a covey in the bracken. He was pointing this time, and perfectly rigid, except for the corners of his mouth, which puckered into a grin of excitement.

Dick slowly walked up to him at the ready, but the birds had moved, and he had to be waved gently forward. His attitude never relaxed, but his legs moved mechanically, and suggested a dog walking in his sleep.

He had hardly gone five yards when the burr of the covey rising broke the spell, and he dashed forward in spite of yells of "down charge."

Dick was lucky enough to get a left and right, and Mr. Feathers accounted for another, and so they did fairly well out of this covey.

They worked on with varying fortunes during the morning, sometimes adding a scuttling rabbit to the bag, or a wood-pigeon that had not allowed for the choke barrel in measuring his distance of safety.

Altogether John's burden was getting a rather heavy one, and by the time they

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reached the hill where lunch was to meet them, he was glad to lay down "the bag."

Alas! no lunch had yet arrived, and they scanned the opposite hill for a sign of the approach of the man with the basket. Presently a dot appeared on the horizon, and it was seen to be the bearer of the welcome lunch.

They were watching his progress down the hill-side, when they saw a blackcock rise almost at his feet and come sailing across the coomb. He looked like a small cannon-ball whizzing through the air. On, on he came, and confident in his pace, he had no intention of being shot for years.

Dick snatched up his gun and let go by instinct into the blue about two yards ahead, the tight ball fluffed out for one instant as the shot struck, and then whirled over and over till it fell with a delightful thump on the turf.

"You be pleased, sir, to have a drink after that," said Mr. Feathers.

"I deserve some lunch, anyhow," said Dick, and with that he proceeded to dive into the basket.

The lunch was not exactly of the *pâté de*

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fois gras order, but rather of that plain description which is calculated to improve the shooting than otherwise.

Duke was not forgotten during the lunch, and performed prodigious feats in the art of catching and bolting whole enormous pieces of meat. His powers of mastication he was, no doubt, reserving should the fates put any retrieving in his way later.

After this heavy meal he grew sentimental, in the manner of his kind, and wormed his way up to lick the face of his generous patron.

Dick was about to repel this advance with a cloud of tobacco smoke, when Mr. Feathers, with unusual animation, exclaimed, "You'll spoil his nose, sir, you will. You s'excuse me speaking, but he'd run into his birds all day."

Once launched on to this topic, he went on to explain how he couldn't abide to see all them gentlemen smoking cigarettes, when there was a check. How the wind took un, and directly hounds got a whiff of un they was no more use to pick up the line. In proof of his argument he went on to show that hounds couldn't run the line

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of a stag if they ran through any smoke when the gorse was being burnt.

Whether this argument had its source in Mr. Feathers's own dislike of tobacco Dick did not pursue, but what he did assert was they had wasted enough time talking, and had better be getting on. The game was then sent back by the luncheon-bearer, and the order of march was resumed. Duke's unsullied nose was soon at work, and checked him in his stride with a jerk of a cord. Working his way up to the covey he had so suddenly winded, he stood like a statue till another brace was added to the bag. This exhausted the partridge-ground, and Mr. Feathers suggested an adjournment to the snipe-bog.

This was not a soft place that would take one up to the knees, but a good quaking bog. "Y'um reckon would swallow a wagon and horses," remarked Mr. Feathers. "You be pleased not to tread where it is very green, sir," he said. Duke however, moved over it like a pixie till at last he pointed, and Dick made his way up cautiously within gunshot, testing the ground with his foot before putting his

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full weight on it. He was glad to add the first snipe to the bag, which, in its variety, began to range over the entire gamut of the poulterer's shop. The bird, unluckily, fell on an ominous piece of turf, with no sign of surface water. On being tested with a stick, it seemed to be bottomless, and Duke had to be entrusted with the delicate mission of retrieving the quarry.

It was an anxious moment when he seized it in his capacious mouth with something of a gulp; but a new and startling exclamation roared at him by his owner arrested his jaws, and by constant exhortation he was induced to bring the bird reluctantly to comparative terra firma.

The game now went on merrily, snipe getting up in all directions, Mr. Feathers being particularly quick in slamming them down before they got into their stride. Once, in his excitement, he risked an uncertain place, only to subside into a pit of black ooze; and as he tilted the beam at seventeen stone, the suction was considerable, and he was extricated with difficulty.

Once on the sound turf again, John pro-

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ceeded to give his master a spring cleaning with a wisp of heather, which, whether from his exertions or from force of habit, he accompanied with a faint blowing sound.

As soon as Mr. Feathers was made presentable, and had had some slight refreshment, it was decided to make a move for home.

The exciting possibilities of bog and snipe being over, Dick gave himself up to the contemplation of the day's sport as they walked home in silence, and recalled many more pretentious days of shooting which had given him less pleasure. It was getting towards evening now, and an intense stillness was on the moor. A large red sun was sinking over the ridge of the coomb, and in the glory of his departure clothing earth's details with a purple shadow; then, as he sank, throwing up golden shafts of light high into the blue, a light that reached and gilded the cloud atoms that floated overhead.

There was something in this moorland sunset that appealed to Dick and soothed his nature. He gazed, and read infinite

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comfort and promise in the vision, in what form or kind he knew not, only that it was impossible to look deep down into that golden mystery of cloudland and remain a pessimist.

It was doubtful if Mr. Feathers was affected to quite the same extent, but even he went as far as to break the silence by remarking, "'Tis a wunnerful nice feelin' evenin', sir, I reckon."

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CHAPTER V

THE RUNAWAY

" When I meet you must I greet you
With a haughty little stare,
Scarcely glancing where you're prancing
By me on the chestnut mare ?"

WHYTE-MELVILLE.

DICK was cantering along the grass that skirted Winston Common, giving the chestnut mare her first breather, when she suddenly quickened her stride and took hold of the bit. He looked about to see what had startled her, when he became aware that he was fast being overhauled by a long-legged, galloping, grey colt ridden by a lady. One glance at his outstretched neck was enough. "Bolted," he muttered, and at the same instant grabbed at the rein ; but the grey was too quick for him, and, swerving in his stride, he went off at a tearing pace.

The girl was making plucky efforts as

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she passed to get the horse's nose down, but with only a plain snaffle it was hopeless.

Dick shouted, "Turn him up the Beacon," and the girl heard. The Beacon was fourteen hundred feet high, and Dick rightly surmised if it was a grass-fed colt he would have had enough "Beacon" by the time he got to the top.

It was no good galloping on the heels of the runaway, which would only madden him, so he cantered along the track, just keeping him in sight.

He had not long to wait before the steep ascent and thick heather began to tell their own tale, and the pace of the grey perceptibly slackened; from a gallop he soon slid into a trot, and then stopped altogether and gazed madly about him. He seemed to think he would like to charge down the hill again, but the rider had other views.

"She's a plucky one," murmured Dick, as he saw the girl cram her horse round and set him going with the whip. "She's going to make him finish the Beacon, and I suppose I ought to go too," he added.

Before he reached the summit he saw the grey standing there in an attitude of

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deep dejection ; the look of frenzied hilarity had gone out of him, and was replaced by a much more humble mien. The lady turned as she heard his footsteps, and then Dick didn't look at the horse any more.

She had dismounted, and now came forward, and in the simplest way possible thanked him for his help, and expressed her regret she should have been the cause of bringing him so much out of his way.

Dick's ready tongue failed him for once ; perhaps it was the sudden consciousness that he knew the girl well, and yet to his knowledge he had never seen her before ; only the voice was familiar—and how lovely she was !

He managed a few commonplace words in return, and then took refuge in the subject of bitting colts, and whether boiling oil was too flippant a punishment for a coachman who sent his young mistress out with such a bit.

"Well," she said, "it was my fault. I told the man to put on a snaffle ; and now, having marched up this hill, I suppose I must march down again."

" It was rather a quick march up, wasn't

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it ?" said Dick. "I should give him a little more time ; he looks rather done."

"May I ask if your name is Miss Farquharson ?" he suddenly inquired.

"You used to call me 'Molly,'" she replied naïvely.

"Of course," he said ; "and I have been treating you with all this formality too."

"Oh, pray go on ; I rather like it, and I am grown up now."

Ignoring this, he went on, "And don't you remember how you used to ride my old pony Seabreeze ?"

"Yes, straddle-legged," she interrupted teasingly. "I have given that up now ; it has grown too fashionable."

"I see you haven't given up being facetious."

"Oh, I have really, only on meeting you I just fell into the old vein again. I have grown quite staid, and altered dreadfully."

"Please don't alter any more," he said.

"Now, when you have quite done chaffing me, I think we ought to be going," replied Molly, and, throwing the reins over her horse's head, she commenced to lead him down the steep. When they reached the

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road, Dick helped her to mount again. One dear little patent-leather boot she placed confidingly into the sort of cradle he had made with both hands to receive it. One, two, three, and she was up.

"I don't think he will bolt with me again going home," she remarked.

"No, I don't think so," he said; "the fact is, I took the liberty of shutting his mouth."

"What *do* you mean?"

"Well," said Dick, "I just tightened that nose-band three holes, and if he does play the fool, I think you will find you can hold him. In any case, he won't open his mouth quite so wide, I promise you."

Molly laughed and said, "What a helpful person you are!" and then a thought struck her: "By the by, what are you doing this afternoon? Will you come over and see father?"

Dick said he certainly would. Then, "Good-bye for the present," she said, and turned her horse homewards.

It was a long way back to Withyford, and Dick took the opportunity to put the chestnut through her paces. It was true, she

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was inclined with her ewe neck to poke her nose a little, but otherwise the purchase seemed a very lucky one.

He decided to have the bay horse out in the afternoon for his ride over to the Squire, and find out what he was like, and so give them both light work for a few days, before the serious business of stag-hounds.

Molly had given her father a glowing picture of the adventures of the morning, in which Dick loomed largely in the foreground. The Squire remembered Dick quite well, but didn't respond to his daughter's enthusiasm; the hard fist of necessity had pounded all the poetry out of his nature. In recollecting Dick, he at the same time could not help recalling the fact that the connexion was not a wealthy one. He had lived much too near to poverty to desire any similar experience for his daughter. Why was it not Cyrus who had tied the wretched colt's nose up and made him go like a curate? These thoughts he kept wisely to himself, only there was not any eagerness noticeable in the tones in which he greeted Dick when he arrived a few moments later.

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Dick soon ingratiated himself, however; they had one great topic in common—viz., horse. T' old Squire had been a great horseman in his day, and the love of horses still remained to him, a redeeming trait in a mind now case-hardened with the growing conviction that only money mattered.

The old man now warmed to his subject. Dick listened, and from time to time added a little fuel to the conversation when in danger of flagging. This was so easily done from the thoroughness of his own study of the matter.

T' old Squire was delighted; he had tried to talk horse with Cyrus, and the memory of it filled him with disgust. At that moment he even hated the necessity for Cyrus, but that necessity was there, and as forcible as a man with a club.

Molly thought the visitor had done enough duty, so she burst into the room precipitantly, with the request that he would come and help her with the colt.

"More colt?" said Dick.

"Yes; we are trying to lounge him, and he will only go round one way."

Dick arrived on the scene, to find the

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young horse with his head in the air towing a small boy round the field.

"The first thing you want to do with that animal is to break his neck," said he.

"He preciously nearly broke mine this morning," she added.

"I know, and that's what I have come about," replied Dick; "but we must have him back in the stable first."

He then proceeded to cut off three or four inches of tail hair, and he carefully bound it round a plain snaffle-bit. "This will give him something to chew," he remarked, "and keep his mouth soft too;" and then, with the aid of two long straps on a surcingle, he got his head in a proper position. "Now we will start him round on the long reins, and you will see the difference."

The colt moved round in perfect control, holding himself together, and picking up his feet like a park hack.

"It is just splendid," said Molly; "I am so awfully obliged to you."

"You must give him a little every morning, not too much at a time, and he will get as handy as a polo pony," said Dick.

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A white-aproned maid appeared at this moment, and Molly said it was a signal for tea, so they both returned to the house.

As they entered the hall, Dick cast an appreciative eye at his surroundings. The old oak panelling appealed to him immensely; it made such a good background, too, for horns of generations of wild red deer that had lived their happy lives amid the woods and streams at the very gates, and now they all looked so neighbourly in the sanctuary of the old hall. Then there was the most attractive row of foxes' masks, set up by some great master of his craft, in which every emotion expressed by a fox's visage was faithfully depicted—masks that suggested the slyness of the vulpine brain at work to elude his pursuers, and others the lion-like determination of the veteran as he buried his teeth in the leading hound.

"Yes, they are good," said Molly. "I am always so sorry when I see a game fox set up in the likeness of a fat pug-dog that had died of apoplexy."

As they strolled into the drawing-room Dick became aware of the tones of a man talking with a strong American accent.

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Cyrus had dropped in to tea, as was his wont lately, and was in the act of initiating Mr. Farquharson into the subtleties of the cake-walk, which he thought would prove quite "a star turn" at the village concert. The Squire's opinion was expressed in a series of grunts. He was evidently struggling with strong emotion, and welcomed the interruption caused by the arrival of his daughter with Dick.

Cyrus was duly presented, and both men bowed stiffly. Although outwardly polite, Dick eyed the stranger with disfavour.

Cyrus, however, was certainly amusing, and was bent on making himself pleasant, and after a little the atmosphere became less strained.

On the following day there was to be a venison dinner in the moorland metropolis in connexion with the hunt, and this was to be followed by a village concert.

Cyrus's suggestion was that the Squire and Dick should drive with him in his brake, and so Molly could have the brougham and come to the concert.

This having been arranged to his satisfaction, he bid them good-bye for the present.

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Dick also rose up to go, but the Squire pressed him to come into his sanctum and smoke for a little.

He then proceeded to explain to Dick what a particular friend he had found in Mr. Potts, and how kind and considerate he was as a tenant in the Manor.

As Dick rode back to the inn he thought matters over, and although Molly's name was not mentioned (except in a general sense), he came to the conclusion it was the girl's future the Squire had in view, and that he himself had received a hint not to get in the way.

Whether he was inclined to take that hint he was not at all sure.

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CHAPTER VI

THE VENISON DINNER

"And they'll bid you to dine on the daintiest fare,
And they'll tell you some tales would make many men stare."

WHYTE-MELVILLE.

MR. FEATHERS was to provide the banquet under the directions of the hunt secretary, and he made an early arrival in the metropolis for the purpose. All day long he busied in and out the hall, and with a total disregard of appearances, walked about the main street carrying glasses and dishes, which, by reason of his peculiar knowledge and forcible manner, he had been able to commandeer for the occasion. Once, in heated dispute with a waiter, he was seen to punctuate the points of his argument with the hand that held the carving-forks.

As the day wore on, his unflagging energy

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began to instil something like order into affairs.

The tables were arranged on both sides of the hall, and the master's table across the top was accentuated by heavy bunches of asters at intervals.

As the farmers and friends of the hunt were invited, carts and other vehicles were arriving all the afternoon till the metropolis was agog with hungry guests. When the master arrived with his party punctually at six o'clock, many of the guests were awaiting him at the side tables, and immediately on his entry every seat in the hall was filled.

The hum of conversation was soon drowned in a substantial course of codfish, which Farmer Garge remarked, in the first breathing moment, "was a safer fish than them 'ere thickey herrin's to eat when you was in a hurry."

The buzz of many voices, which had again arisen like a tidal wave, was now awed into silence by the arrival of gigantic joints of fresh venison, that had been rendered tender by reason of the chase and not by dint of keeping. Mercifully this

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was so, or the presence of so much venison might have been inconvenient to all but the very strong.

However, the farmers were no strangers to "rinned venison." They knew it well, and preferred it to four-year-old mutton, so they lingered long and lovingly over this course, and came again and again.

After a period of belt-loosening silence, conversation sprang again with the arrival of apple-dumplings. This was a light, frivolous dish, and considered more or less optional, so when the master graciously leant across the table and asked Farmer Garge what he could tempt him with, his guest replied he would try "some of that 'ere wobble; I see'd un last year, but I never had none of un," he added, pointing to a trembling blanc-mange in his vicinity.

Sweets were followed by a much more unanimous course of cheese, after which came tobacco, and a desire from the master that they should fill their glasses.

There was a rap on the table which produced immediate silence, and he rose to propose the first toast of the evening—"Prosperity to Stag-hunting." This was

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received with rapturous applause, and then Farmer Garge rose to reply from the farmers' point of view. He said without hounds they couldn't sell their young horses, and without horses they couldn't sell their corn, and what he lost in turnips he got back in venison; and then, speaking as a sportsman, he'd as soon shoot his wife as a stag.

"Your wife bain't here, but I shall tell un," came a voice from the back, and the rest was drowned in roars of merriment.

Then there were murmurs for the Squire, but Mr. Farquharson had no intention of making a speech—in fact, speech at most times came to him with difficulty—so he just sat on and tried to look unconcerned. However, the hints became too strong to be ignored, and he eventually stood up and said, "Gentlemen, I am sorry I cannot make you a speech, but if my opinion about sport will interest you, I think the world is divided into two kinds of people—viz., sportsmen and fools. Gentlemen, sort yourselves;" and he sat down. There was just one second of silence while they drew in their breath and the idea simultaneously,

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and then came shouts of delight and much drumming on the floor.

Then the master rose and said he was indeed sorry to break up so harmonious a company, but that some of his party were due to assist at the concert in the school-room, which was about to begin.

Many of the guests who had come long distances now started for their homes, their roads often being only mere cart-tracks over miles of moor, with few landmarks; but the old moor had no perils for them, and, once clear of the dangers of the village, the farmer usually dozed, and the horse did the rest, making a delightful partnership with one common interest—viz., to get home.

All those who lived in the neighbourhood of the metropolis came to the concert, and the room filled to overflowing. In the first impression there was nothing to distinguish this from any other village concert; there was the same heated atmosphere above, and icy draught on the floor, but these defects were unheeded by an audience that had assembled for the purpose of enjoyment, and meant to get it.

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Molly's was the first name on the programme. She didn't pretend to sing, and still further disliked the idea of singing in public ; but she had been pressed to do so, and as they were old friends she consented.

She sang "Coming thro' the Rye," and, without being theatrical, she put just sufficient expression in it to bring down the house. They stood up and cheered, and continued to clap long after she had resumed her seat among the audience.

The next singer was Mr. William Lipworthy, who was celebrated for his command of seventeen verses of "Uncle Tom Copley." These he proceeded to render. All went well till he had got to the eighth, when he came to a check and threw up his head. The audience gave him a moment to pick up the line, and this failing, "Harrk back, Villum," came the good-natured advice ; and hark back he did, commencing at the beginning again. This time he was more successful, and after the moment of crisis in the eighth verse was passed, he never wavered till his task was done.

"I reckon 'twas the dumplin' that did 'ee, Villum," said one of his friends, as Mr.

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Lipworthy returned from the stage into private life once more. The argument that was about to ensue on this point was hushed by the arrival on the platform of the popular young lady from the post office, who at once began to sing about a young man who was "S-a-i-l-i-ing." This word occurred in every other line of the song, and at each repetition she seemed more to enjoy its savour, opening her mouth wider, and rolling the whites of her eyes. Dick whispered to Molly that he once watched a calf trying to eat a bath-towel; the effect of this innocent remark was fortunately hidden in the applause which greeted the last of the "S-a-i-l-i-ing."

For the last item of the programme, Benjamin the huntsman's services had been secured to sing, "We'll all go a-hunting to-day."

A rousing blast of the horn made every one start, and Benjamin, arrayed in pink, emerged from the anteroom, with Slowboy and Warrior coupled at his side. Such a storm of cheers and view-halloos greeted him that the dramatic entry was marred to some extent by those powerful hounds

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turning tail, and ignominiously towing him off behind the screen again. After a few moments, in which the merriment had increased rather than subsided, the hounds were induced to face the music again. The song throughout was punctuated by continued view-halloos from the audience, but Benjamin, undaunted, went on to the end, with a smile wreathing his weather-beaten features, and finally blew his way out on the horn amid frantic applause.

When the village piano had sounded the last note of "God Save the King," the audience trooped out into the darkness.

"You wait right here," said Cyrus, "and I will go and hurry up the carriages; the men were here till a moment ago, so I guess they will want hustling."

"I would so like to come home in the brake," said Molly; "I feel I want a little fresh air after this."

"Very well," said the Squire, "if you are well wrapped up, for there will be quite fresh air enough on the moor to-night."

"Then we can all go together, and I will take you round to your hotel on the way, Mr. Foster," said the good-natured Cyrus.

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"Well, that's fixed; now, where's that loon of a coachman?" And he bolted out to look for him.

The Squire had moved away from the group to talk to the deaf old lady pew-opener who for this occasion had played the more attractive part of programme girl; thus Molly and Dick were standing alone.

"It was too mean of you to make me laugh like that," said she, "in that sailing song."

"But I didn't mean you to laugh like *that* at all; I was quite frightened."

"Now you are quibbling," she said.

"Am I?" said Dick. "Well, I am not quibbling when I tell you I had not the slightest idea that 'Coming thro' the Rye' was such a pretty song."

Cyrus was at their elbow, there was no time for words, but she just looked softly at him as she turned, and then went out to climb into the box-seat by the side of Cyrus Potts.

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CHAPTER VII

BLACK ROCKS

"They took it up, away they went
Like furies, with a breast-high scent."
A. O. F.

WHEN Dick awoke the next morning, he was conscious of having been through a turmoil of dreams. He distinctly remembered swimming out to sea, on what he now reflected must have been waves of mental indigestion, while the notes of "S-a-i-l-i-ing, s-a-i-l-i-ing," rose and fell with nauseating monotony. It amused him also to recall that at some time Uncle Tom Copley was "Coming thro' the Rye," and greeted him affectionately.

He had carefully avoided the pitfalls of the Metropolis wine carte, and confined himself solely to the contents of the water-cart, as Cyrus playfully expressed it; so

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he came to the conclusion the cause was the dumpling which had already played such sad tricks with the brain of Mr. Lipworthy.

This train of thought was broken in upon by two heavy knocks on the door, which were followed by the rubicund visage of Mr. Feathers.

"You'll s'excuse me, sir, for interruptin'," he said, "but the harriers are meeting at Black Rocks at eleven o'clock."

Mr. Feathers had had multifarious annoyances that morning, which included the discovery of the wrong saddles on all the horses—a fact which gave him visions of sore backs; yet he had found time to think of his guest's amusement, and Dick thanked him for the attention.

Dick had his own particular views about harriers, thinking that on a good scenting day, at all events, the hare was rather overmatched; still, the Exmoor hares, he knew, had hind-legs like a kangaroo, and used them to run fairly straight, as a rule.

Moreover, it was the very thing to try his horses, without giving them a hard day, so he decided for Black Rocks at eleven.

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He chose the chestnut mare for himself, and told his groom to come out on the bay.

Dick was soon jogging on his way over the heather studded with yellow gorse, and now and again the warm honeyed breath of the flower stole across his senses. His eye followed the waves of heather, which seemed to lead straight up into the sky above him.

He was just debating within himself whether really life had anything better to offer than this, when he was attracted by a white speck moving over the moor in the distance. In an instant he descried Molly's pony Jane, and the next moment had mended his pace into a gentle canter. It was surprising how that pony moved over the rough ground, twisting in and out the sheep-paths, and down the dry runnels, never pausing in her swift shambling trot. For some time Dick forbore to extend his mare, but he found at last it was necessary, if he was to overtake that moorland pony with such a start.

The chestnut was distinctly blowing when at last he did range alongside. Molly

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turned her head quickly as she heard the close footfalls of a horse.

"Good morning," she said graciously; and her colour just heightened slightly with the pleasure of the greeting.

"Good morning," he said. "I *am* pleased to see you, and now you can show me the way to Black Rocks."

"Well, if that's all, yonder sign-post would have done it as well," she replied.

"You always snub me," he laughed; "but what a good pony that is."

"Jane?" she said playfully, slapping her on the neck. "Oh, she's a dear!"

Jane seemed to understand, and the corners of her mouth wrinkled behind the loose snaffle-bit, and there was just a suspicion of a wink of the long white eyelash over the dark brown eye, in acknowledgment of the compliment.

The tips of Jane's ears, which were thrown forward, now nearly met, the only outward sign of excitement she showed at the sight of hounds already at the cross-roads.

Mr. Crawley's harriers had the reputation of being the best pack in that part of

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the country. They certainly were a very level lot, a condition of things attained by years of careful breeding, and still more courageous drafting.

There was no fashionable field to wait for. Those that meant hunting were already there—at least, that was the master's view, and he gave the signal for a move within five minutes of the hour.

They were going to draw the slopes of a heather-clad hill and, given scent, there was nothing to stop a smart moorland gallop. As luck would have it, an isolated cloud at this moment decided to unburden itself of a gentle storm, and it began to rain in the characteristic manner of the country, with the blue sky showing on all sides.

The field were accustomed to the vagaries of the weather, and, indeed, as Dick quoted, "time could not wither nor custom stale its infinite variety," so they welcomed this on the chance of an improved scent, as the ground was inclined to be hard and dry, even on the moor.

Unlike the big stag-hounds, the harriers were unable to stride over the heather, and yet seemed too large to make their way

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underneath, and so their progress was a series of jumps. Now and again they were hidden entirely and only the tips of their agitated sterns showed above the surface.

It was a very pretty sight to watch them drawing. There was no sign of slackness; every hound was at work, and using his nose for all it was worth.

Molly and Dick stood still on the opposite hill and watched the busy little pack spreading themselves out and making it good over every inch of the ground.

Dick was inclined to think that his mount had not previously seen anything of hounds. Instead of that intent gaze with which Jane followed the movements of the pack, she had her head up, gazing wildly at the horizon, and at intervals showed signs of getting up on her hind-legs to enlarge the view.

"What she wants," said Dick, "is a sharp burst over that deep heather. There is nothing like the heather step to knock the breath out of them if they are not accustomed to it. I have seen striding thoroughbred horses from the shires burst up in no time on this ground."

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The mare was now twisting and turning as if she stood on hot plates.

At this moment a great hare jumped up right in front of hounds. The pack closed up like a fan, and in a second were screaming like furies in their impatience to get over the heather. Away went the hare, his great hind-legs taking him *uphill* at an extraordinary pace.

When Dick's mount heard the clamour, she reared in earnest and pawed the air in a maddening way. Holding on by the mane, he waited till she had just touched the ground again with her fore-feet, and before she could rise a second time he drove both spurs hard into her sides. She gave one unseating bound into the air, and tore after the flying pack.

It was all sound going, so he just sat down with a grin on his face and let her "rip," as he expressed it. There was no doubt she could gallop, but after her first burst of enthusiasm she soon discovered that strong heather was not suited to her daisy-skimming action; then began a series of exaggerated jumps. As the growth became thicker, after half a mile of this,

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she was lathering freely. Then came the inevitable collapse into a trot. Dick meant to get to the top to see what hounds were doing the other side, so he pushed her along, and a very sorry-looking animal it was that joined the others at the first check.

"Doesn't look much like doing any unnecessary gymnastics now," said Dick.

The sapient Jane had scarcely turned a hair. The tips of her ears were perhaps curled a little closer together in front as she watched hounds, now puzzling out the line.

As the orderly little field stood still, the hunted hare came lolloping along slowly with a limping gait right across their front. She knew quite well that the conundrum she had presented to the pack was not yet solved; she was listening to hear the clamour of the solution, but, meanwhile, there was no hurry. Cousin Reynard would have informed her that he "always kep' on gwy'in' in these circumstances."

The master, however, had no idea of taking advantage of her failings. He merely remarked, "Keep quiet; let them hunt;" and hunt they did.

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At last a chorus proclaimed they had recovered the scent which had been lost on the stony ground. No doubt Puss had now heard the music, and mended her pace, for hounds swept by, busy as bees. There was another sharp burst over the moor, and then the line took hounds across the road into a wide field of dry stubble. There they threw up again. In vain they cast themselves and tried in all directions; scent would not lie on the dry ground.

The master witnessed their patient efforts for some time, and at last decided to lift them forward to a field of roots. This they drew from end to end, but there was no sign of the hunted hare.

The pack was once more taken back to where the line crossed the road, but they could make nothing of it. Then the master got his hounds together and started off to draw elsewhere, solacing himself with the reflection that such a cunning old hare would give him sport on another day.

Dick was very well satisfied with his morning's work, which he concluded had done the chestnut a great deal of good. After her first little display of exuberance

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of spirit, she had really settled down very well, and as far as the bay horse was concerned he had no fault to find whatever, unless it was that he was a bit slow.

They had both done a good deal of galloping, and as they were a good many miles from Withyford, he decided to make a move for home.

Molly thought she had had enough, too, so they started together, with the groom on the bay, a respectful distance in the rear.

"I am as hungry as a hunter," said Molly.

"So am I," said he, "and I vote we draw a farm-house for refreshments. The worst is I never know whether to offer to pay or not. If there is a child about, it is simple. You just admire her curls, and give her something to put in her money-box."

"But if she hasn't got any curls?" said the matter-of-fact Molly.

"Well, there is always the money-box," said Dick.

"You are sure to find one with curls in this farm-house," said Molly. "There are thirteen, to my knowledge."

"What, curls?"

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"No, children," she continued.

"What a jolly little house!" said Dick, dismounting and giving the reins to a small boy who appeared at the moment; and then he moved forward to help Molly alight.

Having hastily slipped her feet out of the elastic loops of her habit, and clearing the stirrup, she presented a stiff bent elbow towards him, which he held, and then, leaning her weight on the arm, she slipped neatly to the ground.

The dame of the farm now came out to welcome them.

"Good morning, Mrs. Muggeridge," said Molly. "We are very hungry, and wondered if you would be good enough to give us something to eat."

"You be pleased to step inside, miss," she said. "Shall I bring 'ee some bread I have just made, miss? or some cake and milk? and would the gentleman be pleased to have some c-i-d-e-r?"

Molly thought some cake and cider would be very nice indeed.

"What delicious cake!" said Dick, as he began on a piece of light crumbling bread-cake.

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"Y'um think so, sir," she said. "Well, my bies dew say as I stands tew far off, sir, when I goes to make un, and throws the currants at un."

"Not a bit of it," said Dick. "This is real bread-cake, and I have never tasted better."

Mrs. Muggeridge smoothed her apron in gratification.

Dick was silent about the cider. He found it distinctly rough. Molly, who was watching, thought she saw his mouth twist under the acidity, like an early symptom of paralysis; then she changed her mind, and drank milk.

After their impromptu meal they both owned to feeling considerably better, and the children who had gathered in the doorway received the full measure of their gratitude. Effusive thanks, too, were offered to Mrs. Muggeridge, who continued to stroke her apron until they were once more on their horses.

Dick thought the remaining miles had passed only too quickly when he parted from Molly at the gates of the Dower House.

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CHAPTER VIII

WATER ACRE FARM

"Near a dark, deep pool of water, as still as still can be,
By the 'geatway' in the 'bushment' stands a rowan-berry tree.
And it's, oh, I'm fondly dreaming that it's there they'll bury me,
Where the evening shadows hover on the meadows by the sea."

A. O. F.

When Molly looked at the stable clock as she entered the yard, it pointed to a quarter to four, the most comfortable hour, she reflected, to arrive home after a short day with hounds. She promptly changed her stiff habit for a loose soft gown, and then sat down to an early and very cosy tea. She rather prided herself on the daintiness of her teas. The tea itself was not strong Indian of the 1s. 4d. a pound order, so affected by thrifty millionaires, but really delicate China tea, and its grateful frag-

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rance seemed to mingle with that of the pot-pourri in the old willow pattern bowls.

She had sunk down into the yielding softness of the most comfortable of padded chairs, and was sipping her tea and musing on the events of the day.

Her fox terrier Bobbie had learnt of his mistress's return, and, following her into the room, was now asleep stretched out on the soft sheepskin rug at her feet. All day long he had been engaged with the old badger who lived in a sandy earth up in the wood.

They were very well acquainted with each other, these two, and when time hung heavily on his hands Bobbie knew there was always excitement to be had for the asking up in the wood. There were unmistakable marks on him of a good deal of excitement to-day. The fact was Mr. Brock, after a heavy meal of young rabbits, was settling down into his beauty-sleep, when the door of his sleeping-chamber was darkened by the eager face of his foe. An insulting bark of triumph roused him thoroughly, and he made a rush at the intruder's foot. Bobbie tucked it away,

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and pinned him across the nose, but Mr. Brock was very strong, and bored in and bit Bobbie's shoulder; then he dashed into a narrow tunnel where his assailant couldn't quite reach him.

Bobbie tore at the opening, and Mr. Brock dug with equal frenzy in the opposite direction. With his powerful forearms he piled up a barrier of sand even quicker than the pursuer could demolish it, and so the race went on most of the day, but Bobbie failed altogether to reduce the distance between them, as he had frequently to pay visits to the surface for air, which his antagonist seemed to altogether dispense with.

However, Bobbie had made a dreadful mess of the sleeping-chamber, which, to Mr. Brock's well-known orderly habits, must have been quite as offensive as his compulsory efforts towards the antipodes.

The day's exertions had quite exhausted Bobbie, who, heedless of the possibilities of tea, had fallen fast asleep on the rug. He was evidently dreaming now, and by his eager little yaps was possibly running Mr. Brock from scent to view. There were

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signs that he was still revelling in the chase when his young friend the kitten found the dreamer, and heartlessly jumped on his face.

Molly was intensely amused at the ludicrous astonishment of his awakening. He gazed in stupefaction for one instant, and then chased the kitten out of the room. She was still enjoying the episode when the maid announced Mr. Potts.

Molly inclined her head and added: "Tell Mr. Farquharson tea is ready," and she proceeded with a new brew.

"Now," said Cyrus, "it is just luck to find you, Miss Molly. We never get any talk, do we?"

"Well, father is coming, so you will get plenty directly," said Molly, with the ghost of a smile.

Cyrus was about to reply when the Squire entered with what was for him a most effusive welcome. The conversation became general now, and Molly gradually withdrew from it, and then, seeing her opportunity, finally decamped, leaving the two men talking together.

After waiting for some time Cyrus made

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up his mind she was not going to return just yet, and he finally took his departure.

When the coast was clear, Molly innocently appeared again, and began to rearrange the flowers. Her cousin, Margaret Meadows, was coming on a visit for a few days, and was expected to arrive before dinner. Margaret was much older than Molly. She had once been called Daisy, but had outlived that stage. She didn't ride, but was devoted to fishing. Now, a brilliant idea struck Molly for her guest's entertainment: they would have a fishing picnic on the morrow; so she sat down and wrote her first letter to Dick on the subject. She proposed starting after breakfast and driving to a point some miles up the river, taking lunch, and then fishing their way down to old Water Acre Farm, where they could get tea, and driving home from there.

Dick sent a note back by the bearer to say he would be delighted to come, and that he had bought a licence and borrowed a rod.

The morning was a lovely one, but not for fishing. The sun was gathering strength in a blue sky, unflecked by a cloud, when

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Dick arrived at the Dower House. He unfortunately remarked, "What an ideal day!" and Miss Meadows, who took her fishing seriously, looked suspiciously at him at once. Her worst fears were to be confirmed later. Meanwhile, they all took their seats in the dog-cart.

"We had a good storm the night before last, and there is much more water in the river," said Molly, for the sake of comforting her cousin.

Miss Meadows was deep in reflection about flies, as to which was likely to be most killing for these very sophisticated trout.

Dick produced a "red palmer," and said: "I am going to lead off with this one."

Molly greeted the appearance of the woolly monstrosity with a peal of laughter. "Where did you get it from?" she said. "Look, Margaret!" and she held it up to derision.

"We are not fishing for chub," said Miss Meadows severely.

"I am," said Dick provokingly, "and I think I ought to practise a few casts now as we drive along."

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"What nonsense!" said Molly. "There are no chub, and how can you cast from a dog-cart? You would just get the hook into one of us."

Dick looked innocent and injured; but there was just the shadow of a twinkle in his eye when he saw Miss Meadows's apprehension, which made Molly suspect that he was pulling the leg of the enthusiast. When the cart arrived at their starting-point, Miss Meadows was appeased by the appearance of a nice open stretch of water with low banks, where, as Dick said, you could throw a fly without either wading or decorating the bushes behind with your best specimens.

Meanwhile, Miss Meadows was wetting a cast, preparing for business. Molly thought she might give her a hint as to the size of the trout, so she remarked: "I am afraid they run rather small here."

"That is a fact," said Dick, "and the smaller they run, the nicer they fry."

Miss Meadows ignored the levity of this remark, and was making a cast or two just to get the line out; then, choosing a place where the current raced round the edge of a

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pool, she skilfully shot the line straight out, and the tiny fly fell first, and touched the water at the very spot. The current swirled it into the eddy round the pool, then it was quickly withdrawn and shot out again. This time as it touched the water there wasa rush, and the quick gleam of silver sides. The rod bent to the taut line.

"He has it! Who-oop!" said Dick, and clambered to the rescue with a landing-net. He didn't jab at the fish and break the cast, as she feared he would, but held the net quite still under water, then raised it as she drew the fish over.

Molly watched this, and became more certain than ever that he did know something, and had been playing with them; but Dick was very discreet, and confined his operations solely to the use of the landing-net.

They kept him well employed, too, with fish averaging half a pound; and this was considered quite a respectable weight for these rivers.

They were some time before they could make up their minds to leave this open reach; but at last they were convinced

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there was nothing more to be had, and Dick said he had got the lunch ready.

Lunch was spread out on a conveniently flat rock that ran out into the stream. Dick said he had chosen the site owing to its natural facilities in the way of washing up, but as there were no plates, this remark was held to be purely facetious.

"Well, it is not a picnic if you have got everything you want," said Molly, biting contentedly at a sandwich.

"They will never believe at home that I caught all these fish," said Margaret.

"No," said Dick; "we have much unbelief to contend with. It has been said that the fisherman goeth forth in the morning, then cometh again at night, with an empty flask, and the truth is not in him."

Molly choked, and ginger-beer had to be administered. A diversion was created by a kingfisher, that flew like a blue streak down the vista of the river, and then dipped into the water for a small fry which glistened for an instant in his bill as the bird went out of sight.

"I love those birds," said Molly; 'they are so original."

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They might have lingered on talking, enjoying the cool air, and watching the eddies that raced round the projecting rock, but Miss Meadows was not to be balked of her prey. She searched every nook and corner with her fly, but all in vain. Time after time she changed the fly, but they were all treated with the same masterful inactivity by the trout, and at last she gave in.

"It is no good," said Molly. "They are off their feed, and we had better stop and make our way down to Water Acre Farm."

Unlike most of the farm-houses, Water Acre stood high on a hill, with glorious views of the valley and the river below. In the old house lived two maiden sisters and their younger brother Garge.

Molly considered it quite a show farm-house, it was so picturesque. The walls were of great thickness, and the rooms were quiet and cool. A grateful coolness met them on the very threshold of entering; and after the hot walk along the rocky river-path the contrast was refreshing in the extreme.

The rooms differed from Mrs. Mug-

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geridge's in the maidenly neatness of their arrangement. Here no marauding hand in search of the sugar-basin made havoc with the crockery, which was arranged all round the rooms with great precision. China spaniels with speckled noses stared with expressions of insane hilarity from the mantelpiece. The oak tables and chairs had never been stained, but were polished with plain beeswax, which showed all the grain of the wood, and made them shine like glass.

A most attractive tea, with home-made bread and honey, was soon spread on the plain oaken table, and the toil of the walk was forgotten in the glories of fresh watercress, which Garge had just brought in. Garge looked like a "property" rustic of the pantomime, and his shock of red hair suggested the Japanese chrysanthemum.

After tea the elder sister escorted the party up into the attics, from which point a splendid view of the long winding river was to be seen.

Dick's attention was attracted by a soldier's red tunic hanging behind the door, and, turning to their guide, he suggested they were harbouring a deserter.

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"No, sir, I bain't; it be Garge's."

Apparently the sight of this garment hanging in some shop had inspired Garge with military ardour, and in this red tunic, with the happy addition of corduroy trousers, he had suddenly appeared at the farm.

"And when un sister seed un, her'n run, and her'n scra-a-med, and said,' Garge, Garge! you never be 'listed!' But he'd done un just to decave us, sir," she added.

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CHAPTER IX

"A FEW WORDS TO THE FIELD"

"Over the grass they fairly flew,
They're racing now from scent to view."
A. O. F.

THE days of Dick's holiday were racing by, as days will when every moment is filled with a variety of congenial occupations. There is no time for much misgiving about the future, or sad reflections over the "might-have-beens," when each day is mapped out ahead with an engrossing programme of sport. All three of his horses were as fit now as himself, and the longest day seemed never too hard for either horse or rider. Ten hours in the saddle only made him hungry for his dinner when he did get it, and comfortably sleepy afterwards. There were moments when he thought of the City, and the uncongenial white faces awaiting him there; but he at once thrust the vision out of his thoughts.

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On this particular morning he had had to get up very early indeed ; he was hunting with the stag-hounds, and the meet was on the far side of the forest. There had been reports from farmers that an old stag and three or four hinds were in some small covers on the very outskirts of the moor, and were doing more than usual damage by raids on the cultivated lands.

It was probably the stag that was doing most of the mischief, for in his lordliness he will only condescend to one bite from each turnip, whereas the thrifty old hind will eat it all, or nearly all.

The master decided to go and hunt this old stag. There were great sporting chances in the day, because if he were found he would run over the entire breadth of the forest, consisting of miles and miles of coarse grass, before he could reach his home in the woods. Scent lies well, as a rule, on the forest, and hounds would be racing at his heels the whole distance.

On the other hand, the covers were small, and the stag (a very wary gentleman) might be disturbed and move before hounds came; and, this being an isolated cover,

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the result would be a disastrous retreat of hounds, huntsman, and field across the desert home again.

When Dick looked out very early to take counsel of the weather, he was greeted with streams of rain from a leaden sky, and the meet was just sixteen miles from Withyford. He hesitated for a second, then decided he had known mornings just like this turn out quite fine by eleven o'clock, and the stag would be sure to take him home ; and he pictured that gallop over the forest grass, with a flying pack screaming in front of him on a burning scent. The vision was too enticing, and he rang wildly for his bath and boots.

Others had not apparently taken quite such a rosy view of affairs, and it was a very attenuated following that actually started, though many had intended to do so on the previous day.

There was something ominous in Benjamin's and the whip's mackintoshed figures. These garments were never donned unless under the firm conviction of a soaker, of which few people had had more lasting experiences than Benjamin. Consequently,

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when Dick saw the mackintoshes his hopes as to weather distinctly fell.

Mile after mile of that long moorland road was passed; horses had dropped into a mechanical trot, a sort of go-easy attitude in which the old hunter gets over the road-work with the least exertion to himself and rider. On the high ground the weather seemed worse, and the atmosphere thick with wet; all around the desolation was intense, no human being or any sign of life save the huddled form of some wild pony, and the thin bleat of a horned sheep penetrating the folds of the mist.

Matters improved a little as they got off the moor, and a slight breeze blew away the fog and cleared the air, but the rain continued relentlessly.

It was on the stroke of eleven when Benjamin got to the cross-roads. A few riders who had been cowering under the shelter of a hedge now emerged, but after some minutes more of them began to arrive by twos and threes, until their numbers amounted to quite a respectable field. Ten minutes' more grace was given, as it was a far meet. Dick scanned the field for a sight

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of Molly, who was to have ridden her father's hunter, but as time went on and she did not arrive, he rightly conjectured the Squire had raised objections to the distance for her on such a morning.

There was a stir among the little crowd now, for Benjamin was changing his tufting pony for a hunter. As the cover was small and there were known to be only a few deer, the master had decided to draw with the whole pack.

Hounds and horses moved briskly enough now, and seemed to have forgotten the discomforts of their long journey. The cover consisted of two sides of a valley, with a stream running a mill-race at the bottom.

The stag would be sure to break on the forest side, and Dick thought it would be well to cross that stream with a due caution rather than in the scrambling excitement of the find; so when they arrived alongside the ford, he walked his horse slowly into the river. The waters surged deeper and deeper, swollen by the heavy rains, till they came up to his boots, and then over the top of them; he felt his horse's body heave for one moment, as if

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lifted by the waters; the next instant he had regained his feet, and was scrambling out the other side.

Hounds were giving tongue as he mounted the opposite hill, and he was just in time to see a hind break cover. The whip moved like a flash, and stopped the leading hound; then the horn sounded down below, and the hounds turned back again into cover. This was repeated again with another hind, but there was no sign of the promised stag. Some farmer, in his amateur efforts of harbouring, had evidently made him suspicious, and, instead of going back to lie in cover, he had moved on in the morning.

There was no other cover to draw; matters were looking serious, and the rain had redoubled its efforts. The master was talking low to the huntsman. "Benjamin," he said, "I am going home now; you had better run a hind for a little, and lose her down the water; then you must just say a few words to the field, and take hounds home."

Benjamin once more took his pack into cover, and in a few moments they were

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running a line down at the bottom. Dick kept along the top till hounds had run the length of the wood, when they swung up towards him over the hill. He now began to suspect, but was quite game for a gallop; they raced over the grass at a pace that made Benjamin nervous for the safety of that hind, and he made up his mind to lose her at the first chance. The rain came down with the force of bullets into the faces of the riders, and horses pulled madly at the slippery, sodden reins.

The ground was quite sound going, and it was a mad gallop while it lasted. Soon a belt of thick bracken checked hounds, and enabled the huntsman to get on terms with them; but they soon hit it off again, and took the line slanting down to a little plantation with a stream running through it; here they paused for a second, and Benjamin saw his chance. He blew them together in a twinkling, and cast them up-stream; up he went, working both sides of the banks, till he was sure he had quite lost that deer.

Then there were still those few "words" to say to the field which had been heavy on

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his conscience the whole time; at last he summoned courage, and turned round and faced them.

"Gentlemen," said he, "'tis a mucky day; we've lost our stag, and we'd better go home."

Dick had noticed the line slanted to the river down-stream, and when Benjamin proceeded hastily to cast up-stream, the whole manœuvre was plain to him; he said nothing, only grinned to himself, and wondered how many had noticed it.

Benjamin, with an expression of mournfulness, was about to put the horn to his lips and blow his hounds together, when a sight of Rallywood working his way towards a thick patch of bramble caused him to pause in the act and watch the old hound. An impatient whimper from the veteran as he scrambled through the briars electrified the small field; then came the deep roar of triumph as he got a view, and a truly warrantable stag leapt up in front of hounds.

"H-i-i-i-c-k! Forrard!" shouted Benjamin in his glee; and, catching his horse short by the head, he set him going after the pack.

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The stag faced straight across the forest, and his long, easy stride soon bore him away from hounds.

A moment ago they were roaring on his heels; now the music had died down to a whimper, for the pace left no breath to spare as they raced on his line with deadly swiftness.

The forest lay before them, with nothing to stop hounds or horses for miles. The stag was now seen breasting the opposite hill, a brown patch moving quickly, and hard to distinguish against the colouring of the dried grass. The great danger was that he should wind either of the hinds which had preceded him on almost the same line he was taking. This he would no doubt have done, but hounds left him no time to look about; even now they gained on him going up the hill.

The pace was telling, too, on the horses, which had long since ceased to pull. Dick felt his mare was still going strong, but the neck lathered under the wet reins, in spite of her hard condition, and the veins stood out in knots. Would there come a check to give horses a moment to catch their breath?

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The stag knew there was no rest for him till he reached the Warner Woods, and for that haven he made straight as a crow.

He had had no time to get his second wind, for hounds, since the find, had been running him almost in sight, and his fat condition began to tell.

Once a sheep-dog had chivvied him slightly out of his course, and so pressing were hounds that this insult went unavenged, but the pack checked for an instant where the dog had chased and so foiled the scent.

Dick took a pull at the mare, but it was only for a moment. As hounds came to their noses they feathered and spread out, then flung together and drove away hard on the line again. Dick was conscious of Benjamin's voice for the first time. "Forard—forard on—forard." Then he saw the tops of the trees of the dense Warner Woods were in sight. Would he do it? Once inside, he was safe, for they were full of deer. Dick was conscious at this moment that he was flying through space; then the grass which he had so long watched racing under him suddenly rose up and

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struck him a blow that knocked his hat over his eyes, and drove out the scant store of breath from his body. The mare had dropped her fore-legs into a concealed grip and pitched on her head and rolled over. It was a second before he could think what had happened; then he straightened out the good hat that had probably saved his neck, and became aware that Benjamin was impatiently holding his horse and telling him to get on.

"I am all right," said Dick with a grin, as he scrambled into the saddle.

"I thought, sir, you be dying in the last ditch," said Benjamin.

"Will he do it?" said Dick.

"I can't rightly say, sir, till I gets a better view of un, but yew can never tell," and the wind took the rest of the sentence as he turned to gallop in earnest once more.

The woods looked quite close now in the clear air, though probably two miles distant. When the stag once more came in view, it was seen that he was reeling in his stride, and hounds had gained. Still, he had not far to go, and the chance of there

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being outlying deer near the woods was considerable.

By adroitly running the inside of a bend Benjamin got on better terms with his hounds, and cheered them on. They were running now practically from scent to view, and fairly coursed their stag over the grass. As the leading hounds snapped at his haunches he turned and sent them flying with his fore-feet, but the pause was fatal, for hounds made a dash at him, and, getting him by the ears, fairly pulled him down in the open. Benjamin was off his horse in an instant, and, charging into the mêlée, he skilfully administered the *coup de grâce*.

The attenuated field now consisted of three. One was Dick, who held the huntsman's horse, the other was trotting some hundred yards behind, and the last member was coming in at a walk.

The rites having been performed, Benjamin left the stag in charge of a neighbouring farmer and started slowly for home.

As Dick was the only rider, and there was no question of splashing hounds' faces riding on the grass roads, he ranged up alongside of the huntsman to talk. Ben-

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jamin, as usual, was most entertaining, and proceeded with a long serious story about a dream he had had the night before the opening meet, the day above all others on which he most desired a good run for the field and a kill at the finish.

On this particular occasion he had, perhaps, gone to bed too early after supper the night before. "I had a wunnerful drem, sir," he said. "I went right through the run, I did, till we come to a check; then I said to master, I said, 'Our stag be behind us, sir;' and he said, 'Benjamin, you go for to do what you think right.' I took hounds back up the w-a-a-ter, and they fresh found un at once. I dremmed all that. Sure enough, when we come to the run the next marnin' we checked where I dremmed. I knew what to say. I said, 'Master, our stag be behind us, sir.' He said to me, 'You go for to do what you think right,' and them's was the words of my drem. I took hounds back, and found un and killed un with half an hour's run on the mure. When I got home that night I tells Mrs. Benjamin what I dremmed, and she says to me, she says, 'You get on! you and your drems!'"

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CHAPTER X

WITHYFORD SHOW

" ' An eye ' like a woman's—bright, gentle, and brown,
Loins and a back that would carry a house,
And quarters to lift him smack over a town."

WHYTE-MELVILLE.

THE next morning broke with a cloudless sky and a hot sun. With the genial warmth of it shining into his breakfast-room, Dick found it difficult to reconcile the morning's surroundings with the climate of the previous day. Something of the difficulty occurred to him which he always felt in associating the benign, placid cat of the morning with the raging demon that had shattered his beauty-sleep in the night. The wind had suddenly gone to what the farmers called "up-along"—that is, up along the coast—a northerly wind which in the autumn invariably meant fine weather.

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It was lucky that the change had come, it being the day of the Withyford Horse Show—a day set apart for buying horse, talking horse, and thinking horse, till night closed the proceedings.

So many people, directly or indirectly, were afforded a livelihood by the fascinating animal, others depended on it for their amusement, and all were interested, or understood something of the subject. No wonder, then, thecountry-side was roused; and even at this early hour men, ponies, horses, and foals were pouring into Withyford by every tortuous lane that led there.

Dick lingered over his breakfast, knowing it was the only meal he was likely to enjoy in comfort at the inn for that day. Already the entrance was blocked by broad-shouldered farmers so that it was as difficult to get by and still harder to push through.

Mr. Feathers's beer barrels were charged for the occasion, and although cider was considered the wine of the country, on gala occasions of this kind the demand was for beer. Beer was being drawn, jostled for, drunk, and spilt, till the reek of it per-

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vaded the house, and Dick decided to take his pipe and sit on the bridge outside.

From this coign of vantage he could watch the horses come in on their way up the hill to the show-field. They were chiefly of the local type of horse—cobby, and short on the leg, but with wonderful stamina and hardy constitutions inherited from the moorland pony blood.

Huge farmers came in, riding ponies from the moor that had been scarcely handled at all—ponies of thirteen hands, carrying as many stones' weight in the bulky form of the rider. Their spirits seemed only controlled by the weight of their burden, for with heads and tails up they neighed to each other in a way that suggested decided playfulness under easier circumstances.

"Now, sir," said a farmer, addressing Dick, "if yew want a nice pony, yew can have this un for twelve pound. He is six year old, and has never done no work. No, sir, I won't get off; 'tis the weight that keeps him down like, but yew can do anything with un if yew's gentle. If yew was to hit un, he don't care whether he lives or he dies."

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Dick intimated that he did not require the services of such an accommodating pony at the moment; so the farmer, swaying to keep his balance, and with his feet nearly touching the ground, passed on in the procession up to the white-tented ring on the hill.

At this moment a note arrived from Mr. Potts, saying that Mr. Farquharson and Molly were lunching on his brake at the show, and he hoped Dick would join the party.

This was a most fortunate arrangement, as Mr. Feathers had just intimated, when Dick asked about lunch, that every plate and knife and glass that he could raise had gone up to the common luncheon tent.

To add to the pandemonium of noise in this all-peaceful village, a gipsy fair had settled down, and was in full swing. The centre of attraction was a very uncertain roundabout, which gyrated slowly, with a swaying movement, round a man playing a barrel-organ. The penetrating voice of La Gitana seeking victims for her rifle-gallery was tempered by the incessant blows of the strong man with the mallet,

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and the rattle of the recording disk as it flew up the indicator.

Dick was not sorry to get through into the comparative quiet of a by-lane, by which route he could reach the horse show. Here, again, was a considerable crowd of led horses, neighing and kicking, and foals running loose, and groups of excited farmers, all trying to talk at once.

Dick made his way to the enclosure, the narrow entrance of which was guarded by the neat figure of Leman, the whip, in new pink.

The show had not officially commenced yet, so Dick took a stroll into the ring to have a look at the jumps.

There was the usual water-jump, which he knew they would all ride at with arms and heels going, and fidget the horse out of his stride, in their efforts to get the pace on. There were also in and out hurdles, and hurdles with thick gorse, but the chief feature was a huge bank. This really was a formidable obstacle. A straight wall of earth over four feet high, and about as broad as a billiard-table. It was too broad for flying, and the proper way to negotiate

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it was for the horse to change his feet on top, and this was exactly the type of jump met with when hunting the enclosed country in the winter.

As Dick had finished inspecting the jumps, his eye fell on Cyrus's brake and high-stepping horses, which were moving over the grass in fine style. Sitting on the box by his side was Molly, as Dick thought, looking simply bewitching. She waved her hand to him as they pulled up alongside the rails.

After the usual greetings from the party, Molly said :

" Father wouldn't let me come yesterday. He said it was too far in such weather."

" I nearly didn't go for the same reason," said Dick.

" What did you do ?" said Cyrus.

" We had the run of a lifetime, and killed on the forest," said Dick.

" Well, that's my luck," said Cyrus.

" Well, never mind," he went on cheerily ; " luncheon is ready now, and, like the lazy cat, I guess I'm best at chasing bowls of milk."

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With that he commenced to carve the nearest chicken.

"Now, Miss Farquharson, may I give you some of this?"

"Thank you," she said.

"Brown or white?" said Cyrus.

Molly looked confused.

"Leg or wing?" muttered Dick, who was holding her plate.

"Wing," she said, "if you please."

"Please, Mr. Farquharson, I'll trouble you for some of that ham," said Cyrus. "It's peach-fed," he went on; "I know all about hams."

"What a waste of peaches!" said Molly.

Conversation was here interrupted by a loud explosion. The butler had been struggling for some moments with the champagne bottle, and the obdurate cork had taken him unawares.

"Now," said Cyrus, "when your glasses are filled, I want you to drink success to my grey mare."

"Are you showing her?" said Molly.

"Indeed I am," he replied, "and I want you to wish me luck."

A quick note on the horn called their

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attention to the fact that Benjamin, on foot and arrayed in spotless pink, was parading the entire kennel round the ring. It was indeed a pretty sight to see these big hounds, drafted owing to their size, from all the best packs in England, and every hound over twenty-five inches from the shoulder.

"They look big," said Cyrus, "when you are not mounted yourself."

"Yes; and I had no idea Benjamin was so small," said Molly.

The show classes now were chiefly for cart-horses and brood-mares with foals afoot, not a very exciting entry; and so the party broke up, and strolled round the enclosure to look for friends. After this came the ponies, a much more taking lot; and, indeed, dealers from all parts of the country had made their way to this little village show to buy the best pony mares, and some of these gentlemen were talking with a German accent.

There were several classes, all equally good, and the task before the judges in picking the best was not by any means an easy one.

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At last the long list of pony awards was disposed of. Then came an open class for horses, and Cyrus was seen to be mounted on the beautiful grey mare. That he was not to have it all his own way became apparent from the start. There were no less than twenty in the ring, one or two of which ran him very close, and these had the advantage of riders who knew how to show them.

There was a horse-breeding farmer on a chestnut, and a dealer showing a dark bay with a tan muzzle, a colour very common in this country, and said to signify descent from the true Exmoor pony.

It was evident that Cyrus had got the grey too short by the head, and she was fidgeting under a rather sharp bit, and so would not settle down to her paces. These three horses were stopped by the judges as they passed, and the remaining seventeen were sent round twice more to see if there were any others requiring special consideration. Then these were halted in a line at the back of the three chosen first, and the judges went patiently through them all.

"It lies between those three," said Molly, "I am sure."

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"You are right," said Dick; "and I think I could find the winner, if he would only let her head go."

"I know," said she. "Poor dear! he has no hands, but I do hope he will win."

The three were now sent round the ring one by one, and told to gallop.

At the gallop it was at once apparent that the bay moved clumsily, and his action was not quite true.

The chestnut's weak point was behind the saddle, but he galloped all right.

Then came the grey. She moved at the trot sideways, and then, when asked to gallop, she was inclined to break away, and when Cyrus tried to pull her round, got her head on one side and moved awkwardly.

"It is the chestnut on that performance," said Dick; and when the judge moved towards the horse in question, they thought it was certain. But no, he was not satisfied, and was going to ride them each in turn himself.

The chestnut was certainly a very nice horse to gallop, but scarcely up to much weight.

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The bay, when extended, moved no better than before.

Then came the grey. Dick was delighted to see the judge let the curb chain out a link or two before he mounted. He walked her quietly for half the way; then, as he trotted, she dropped her nose into her chest, and picked up her feet like a lady.

"That's the style!" said Dick. When he called upon her to gallop, she shot into her pace on the instant, and pulled up in a yard.

"That's done it," said Dick.

When the judge dismounted, he gave one formal look at the other two, and then handed Cyrus the dark blue ribbon.

There were shouts of applause from the critical spectators, who had been watching the contest with the closest attention; and hand-clapping burst out all round the ring.

Unfortunately, Cyrus had got to ride round the ring in this tumult. Once it looked as if the mare was going to jump the rails, and the crowd opened out in a panic, but he stopped her in time, and got her out into the yard.

"Let's go round and congratulate him," said Dick.

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"Do let's," said Molly in her excitement; and they accordingly made their way out of the enclosure.

The jumping class had now formed up, and consisted chiefly of old and tried performers. There were one or two young farmers mounted on "four-year-olds," which were calculated to afford some amusement when it came to jumping.

The first performer was one of these, and the rider had to undergo considerable chaff from his friends at the ring-side.

"'Tis wunnerful hard fallin', Jim," said one.

"I bain't afeard," was the answer.

The young horse took the first hurdle with a lightheartedness which argued well for his chances; but when he came to the "in and out," he jumped in, but had a vague idea of getting out again, and, in spite of his rider's efforts, there he stopped and refused to budge, amid roars of laughter.

"'Tain't fust time he has been in the pound, y'um reckon," shouted a yokel, and at this brilliant sally there was more laughter. At last the horse ignominiously

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charged a hurdle and knocked it down. In spite of vigorous handling at the water, he only landed into the middle of it in company with the rider's hat, and so the fun went on until the prize was taken, as is usually the case, by an old horse who was accustomed to the ring and to jumping in public.

When Dick got back to the inn after the prize-giving, he found it blocked with farmers, and heavy with the odour of beer; vigorous efforts on the bell-rope at last produced a maid, and eventually the scrappiest of cold dinners. In despair, he decided to go to bed. Flaring naphtha lamps from the village threw flickering shadows on his window; he was conscious of the thin metallic notes of Gitana, mercifully softened by distance, and, with the comforting thought she would be gone to-morrow, he fell asleep.

Having gone to bed early, he was correspondingly wakeful in the morning, and decided to get up.

Two or three hearty peals at the bell produced no response. Withyford was sleeping heavily after a surfeit of gaiety.

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He opened his door, and found his tub with a full can by the side of it. This was evidently forethought on the part of John, and so he bundled the tub into his room, and proceeded to fill it from the large can; the water from the Exe foamed as it splashed into the bath. One look was enough—*it was beer!*

The fates were against him; he crept into bed, and resignedly fell asleep again.

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CHAPTER XI

CYRUS'S COAT-TAIL

" Madam, what shall be made of such as we,
Who with our dress our fortunes doff or don ?
My tailor knows (and who so well as he ?)
Mine's not the income to be married on."

PERCY REEVE.

IT was always a minor grievance with Cyrus that it was not the custom for the field to wear pink with stag-hounds on Exmoor, and that the " red coat " was confined to the master and hunt servants. Not only did he enjoy the appearance of himself in pink, but in the wider realms of mufti he completely lost himself, and was conscious of mistakes in his attire where there was no hard-and-fast rule to guide him.

Cyrus noticed that whether Dick was turned out for wet or fine weather all his hunting kit seemed to harmonize, and he determined to consult him about his own.

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Dick, when asked, was forced to admit there was no law against wearing brown butcher boots with a black frock-coat, but he didn't think he should choose it himself, and suggested grey Chipping-Norton tweed instead.

Cyrus decided not to lose a moment in obtaining a grey tweed coat, and Dick thought that Mr. Field, the sporting tailor in the moorland metropolis, would make him exactly what he wanted. Dick was rather bored by the subject, but good-naturedly promised to go with Cyrus and see fair play when the coat was ready to try on.

Mr. Field was not only a good tailor, but as he hunted regularly two days a week himself, he knew exactly where the shoe pinched, so to speak. He was very jealous of his reputation, too, and had been known to severely reprimand a young farmer at the meet who was not doing him justice by wearing his breeches with the buttons too far round the leg.

Accordingly, when Cyrus and Dick arrived for the trying-on process, he was correspondingly flattered that they had not

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given the order to one of those West-End tailors in London, who, he explained, had never been on a horse in their lives, much less hunted.

This was one of Mr. Field's days of business, and the hunter now was wholly dominated by the instincts of the tailor. He accordingly met his customers in his working attire, and with several tape-measures festooned round his neck.

"Jim," said he, calling back into the work-room, "saddle the black mare;" and the slippered apprentice went out into the yard to do his bidding. Mr. Field went on to explain, "If the coat, sir, is to be worn on horseback, it should be fitted on horseback."

Cyrus was then induced to put on the garment, a thing of shreds and stitches, and very odd he looked in it, mounted on the black mare.

At this moment Molly arrived to see Mr. Field about mending a habit, and, finding no one in the shop, she walked round to the yard.

Mr. Field was mounted on a chair, decorating Cyrus's back with an equilateral

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THE MARE WENT SMARTLY OUT OF THE YARD.

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triangle in chalk. She would have as quickly withdrawn again, but the pent-up feelings of Dick gave way in an audible laugh, and Cyrus turned his head, and so did Mr. Field; the chair, which had been wobbling on the uneven cobbles of the yard, now precipitated Mr. Field on to the stones, and tipped over with a clatter at the horse's feet. This was too much even for the nerves of the black mare, who, finding the halter was loose, gave one bound, and then went smartly out of the yard at a hand canter. As the halter-rope was trailing on the ground, Cyrus was completely helpless; and so were Dick and Molly, but from a different cause. Laughter held them doubled up and speechless, nor was their condition improved when the long stitches gave way, and a liberal coat-tail fell in the road behind the fleeing Cyrus. The village now was thoroughly roused by the unwonted spectacle; the coat-tail was retrieved by a small boy, who promptly joined in the chase.

At the very last shop in the village the baker ran out in time, and caught the trailing rope of the halter, and Cyrus was

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led back, the centre of an admiring crowd, with the small boy and the lost coat-tail taking up the rear.

The yard gate was unceremoniously shut on the crowd, and Mr. Field relieved his feelings by cuffing the small bearer of the coat-tail, who had followed them inside.

The chair was requisitioned once more, but put on a more even basis, and this time Dick held the horse's head.

"It wants a little more spring from the waist," said Mr. Field; "but I think it will make a nice coat, sir, for you."

"I guess it ought to. It's made a circus of me up to now," said Cyrus.

"A most extraordinary accident, sir—a combination of unfortunate circumstances," said Mr. Field, bowing them out of the shop.

As they strolled up the main street they met Jim Yards, the harbourer.

"Marnin', gentlemen," said Yards, touching his hat.

"Why, you've still got the old bay mare," said Dick.

"Yes, sir, I 'ave, sir. A wunnerful mare she be. I've hunted her eleven

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seasons, got four foals from her, and she's never been shut up in a stable. Rins out in the field, she do, and comes under the shelter when she likes."

"Is she very fast?" ventured Cyrus.

"She can arlmost flyee, she can, sir." Cyrus looked incredulous—at least Yards thought he did—so he continued: "Yew be pleased to s'excuse me, sir, but I'll race any horse in the kingdom with this mare—a Derby winner, I don't care whaat yew brings—*if yew but let me choose the ground!*"

Dick was intensely amused, as he knew full well it was not the Derby winner he would back in a race down the stony slopes of what was known as the Graveyard. Often he had seen Yards in an emergency move over these rocks and down the steep sides like a rabbit, and marvelled at his nerve and the mare that could gallop on such ground.

"It's the way they be brought up, sir. If you was to put a horse from up-country to such work, he would knock himself to bits, and break your neck in the bargain, sir, he would."

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Yards knew a great deal about a horse, but very little of "up-country," though it was a favourite phrase of his.

"Now," said Cyrus, "I want to know how you harbour a stag."

"Well," said Yards, "that be a terrible long story. Yew caan't learn un in a week, nor yet in a year. Yew wants to be always about and learn the slots of un first; then when 'tis ser dryee yew can't tell one from t'other. What I likes is a starm in the early marnin', then I can see the marks of un writ plain. Yew caan't mistake a heavy deer if it's in the wet ground and yew gets a good slot of un, 'cause he's blunt in the toes and broad in the heel; but when yew comes to harbour un 'tis another matter. Yew have got to think about wind, and 'tis often shifty down—in the coombs—and if he gets the wind of 'ee he'll move for sarten, and yew won't know et, neither. Then there's hinds; they's wass than a contrary wind, the old twoads; they's always on the watch, they be. Yew gentlemen be pleased to come out next Tuesday, for we's like to get a rin on the forest."

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"I certainly will," said Dick, "for it's my last day this season, at all events."

"Well, sir, we shall have a rin, yew mark my words. Now I be going to see doctor, I be. I had to ride down over the moor last night for un. My little boyee, he took tarrible bad in the night."

"I am sorry," said Dick.

"Well," said Yards, "I should 'a gone to this yer doctor" (referring to a well-known Eton master), "wot's took the Down House, but they dew tell me as he ain't a praper doctor, but keeps a little boyees' school somewheres up the country."

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CHAPTER XII

THE BEACON RUN

"The rushing Barle sounds far away;
I hear the roaring pack;
I see the stag we've run all day;
In dreams I see him stand at bay,
A rock behind his back."

A. O. F.

SEVERAL letters from London on urgent matters had disturbed Dick's serenity lately, and the uneasy consciousness of a depletion in his banking account warned him that his long holiday must at last come to an end. He had, accordingly, fixed the following Tuesday, referred to by Yards as most likely to afford a good run, as a satisfactory ending, and perhaps one that would dwell in his memory for many a day.

On this particular morning the weather seemed anything but propitious. An oppression and a heavy stillness in the atmosphere suggested thunder; there was not a

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breath of air even on the moor, and the birds flew low and chattered in the thickets, as though unwilling to leave the shelter.

According to the secret information imparted by Yards there was an old stag he knew to have his bed in the thick bracken on the sides of the valleys between the cliffs which bordered the Bristol Channel. "If we can only head un from going out to sea, he is bound to face the open," he added.

This being Dick's last day, he was going to treat himself to what was a luxury in that country for the field—viz., a second horse.

He accordingly told his groom to wait out on the forest with the bay at the Gallow's Post, where he would find the second horses of the hunt.

The stag was supposed to be lying in a valley of thick growth, where the tall fern grew in its rankness four or five feet high. There he had chosen his bed, knowing full well that the pungent odour of it killed all scent. So completely is this the case when the growth is green, that hounds might

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pass within three or four feet and never wind the stag.

The master asked the field if they would kindly keep on the seaward side so as not to head him from the moor.

Benjamin then took the whole pack into the bracken and drew it towards the open ground. There were no paths through it, and the little tufting pony was entirely lost in the tall branching fern, and only a small spot of pink coat indicated his laboured progress.

At last hounds were seen to have drawn it right through, and Benjamin was trotting back to the master with the pack. Yards was quite certain the stag was there: he had watched him through his glasses enter the coomb that very morning.

Benjamin said he thought that might be, but the stag had moved. Yards said he knew where he was, and asked the master if he might go down and "whack un up" with his whip.

The master sent hounds down again, and Yards led the way. He was lost to view for a moment, and then two cracks of his ponderous whip rang in the valley; there

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was a commotion, and a rush, and a brown form leapt high out of the fern and sped up the side of the hill, with the pack roaring at his heels. He soon shook them off up the steep, and for one moment looked as if he was going to face the open; but no, the day was hot, and the last feed of roots had been rather a hearty one. He was not going to run for the fun of it, when he could dodge round the cliffs and hide.

The disappointed field watched as he made a detour, and then lost sight of him as he entered a little cover which ran down to the rocks on the beach. If he thought to hide here he was mistaken, for hounds were much too close, and pushed him through the wood, and in full view raced him over the beach till he took safety in the sea. Hounds followed him, but, floating high out of water, he swam away from them without the least exertion. Hounds, on the other hand, with the small waves breaking right over their faces, were fast becoming exhausted.

Benjamin knew the danger of the stag turning back and drowning the exhausted

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hounds one after the other with a stroke of his fore-feet.

At this moment he was seen spurring his way over the beach at full gallop amid the scattering stones, and blowing his horn with a vehemence that shattered the muffled sounds of the surf.

One by one hounds heard it and turned. As they faced the shore they were less distressed, as they no longer had to face the waves. Benjamin was now off his horse and waded in the sea, boots, pink coat and all, to hearten some of his favourites that seemed almost sinking from exhaustion. At last they were all safely landed and shaking themselves, their eyes smarting with the salt and sand, and their faces puckered with distaste. Meanwhile, this cunning old stag had floated leisurely along the coast until he had got round the point and out of sight.

Benjamin knew there was a tempting cover round that point, and, finding no pursuit, the stag would probably land again.

He meant, if possible, to get between the sea and the stag. He therefore led the

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field by tortuous paths along the cliff—narrow paths that wound high up the sides of the cliffs till the sea shone like a glass straight under the stirrup-iron.

The progress was slow, and necessitated Indian file and many stoppages. Unfortunately, during a pause a horse in front of Molly kicked a wild bees' nest in the bank-side. The effect was immediate and startling—horses were kicking and spluttering in the narrow path, and angry bees were buzzing in all directions. Dick yelled to a friend ahead to gallop, and the line of horses moved out of the danger-zone in quick time, heedless of the narrow way.

"That's a let off," said Molly, as they at last pulled up. "I expected every moment my horse was going to take a sort of 'smuggler's leap' with me into the unknown."

"I am not sorry to get off those paths myself," said Dick. "They'd try the nerves of a goat."

When they got down to the beach, they found the slot in the sand where the stag had come ashore, and the only question was, had he laid up, or had he gone on?

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Benjamin waved his hounds into the cover, and almost immediately there was a "halloo !" above, but the whip moved down to say it was a farmer who was tallying a light deer, with but "two-a-top" one side. This was a young deer that the heavy stag had evidently forced to run for him, and Benjamin knew he was lying still in the vacated bed, waiting till hounds had settled on the line of his "understudy."

Hounds were stopped and brought back again, but so close did he lie, with his head pressed flat on the ground, and holding his breath when hounds were near, that they passed by him, till at last an actual nip on the haunch from Michael told him he was discovered. With a bound and a stroke of his fore-foot, he sent the old hound flying head over heels into the thicket, and then sped away up through the wood.

The horn was going now merrily with short, eager blasts, that electrify as only a horn can that is blown at a gallop.

"Forrard on ! forrard on ! forrard !" and there is a scurry down the woodland paths to the road at the bottom that leads up the valley to the moor.

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"He is going right this time," said Dick, as he galloped up to Molly, "and we are in for a good thing."

"In for a good thunderstorm," said Molly. "Listen to that!" as an angry peal of thunder burst from overhead and then echoed and re-echoed round the hills.

"He is going to take us up the Beacon," said Dick; "and he is a straight-necked one, you'll see. Mind the grips!" he called, as his horse stumbled, and then recovered himself with a scramble, in which his nose was nearly on the ground.

At this moment the lightning flashed in forks over the dark heather, and at the same instant the air seemed to split and vibrate with a crash of thunder that followed. One lady's horse bolted, and tore back down the slopes. Two cavaliers detached themselves from the field, and rode in pursuit, while the chase swept madly on.

For a little while the stag was seen outlined against the dark sky as he topped the shoulder of the Beacon. The lightning seemed now to play on the very stirrup-irons as it flashed along the ground, while the unceasing crashes of thunder maddened

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horses with fright. Then came the blinding rain that blotted out everything on the horizon.

Hounds were racing through it all on a screaming scent.

"Look at Benjamin!" said Dick, to cheer Molly a little.

Benjamin was standing up in his stirrups, with his body bent forward and eyes scanning the distance for a view, and his good grey galloping under him.

In cheery tones between the shattering peals of thunder came the well-known voice, "Forrard on! Forrard on! Forrard!"

"I guess he'd ride through the gates of death if there was only a scent," said Cyrus. "But tell me, how high is this molehill, Miss Farquharson?"

"Fourteen hundred feet," she said.

"I guess they got me on a pedestal for this thunderstorm," he added.

Molly laughed—she had to—and so they cheered her along; but they had little breath really for talking, the pace was too hot.

They were now over the brow, and going

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down the steep sides; surely the stag had gone into the covers. No; the line swung to the right; his point was the other side of the forest, and he was going to reach it or die on the way.

"My horse will never get over the forest; he is nearly done now," said Molly.

"I have got a second at Gallow's Post," said Dick. "If he has not been washed away, you shall have that. My chestnut is full of go still, and will stay for a week."

Benjamin sheered off to meet his second horse, and Dick and Molly followed.

Cyrus said: "I guess I am going home, for I'm no water-rat to stand this climate."

Dick's groom luckily came up first, as they had to change saddles. Molly was off in an instant, and with fingers trembling in her excitement, she helped to undo the buckles of the girths. The saddles were hastily exchanged, and then, with a "One, two, three!" and a spring, she was up on the back of the bay horse. Meantime, Benjamin had got his second horse, and, bringing it alongside the one he was riding, he had vaulted from one saddle to the other, and was off after the flying pack.

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"We have got to catch him," said Dick, "because he knows the way over the bog."

Then they sat down to ride their hardest. Dick marvelled at the staying powers of the chestnut, and vowed to himself he would never part with her.

After a long, stern chase they were relieved to see Benjamin pull up into a trot as he reached the soft ground, and they soon caught him, and were following cautiously in the wake of his coat-tail. Patches of white bog-flower and suspicious green turf were on each side of them. Benjamin made no mistakes, but trotted on confidently, sometimes in a winding track, but always on, till at last they reached the sound ground, and were once more galloping hard.

Benjamin said they must catch hounds at a place called the Ponds, as they had cut off a corner coming over the bog.

Sure enough a line of white dots was seen on the horizon coming across their front, and they pulled up and breathed their horses. The old hounds were seen to be leading the pack, running with

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heckles up, and Benjamin said their stag would never cross the water.

He was right, for as they descended the hill which sloped down to the river, now swollen with rain to a brown, swirling torrent, they heard the roaring bay of the pack. Hounds and stag were fighting in the cascade of brown water, and the spray from the conflict flew high over the intersecting rocks. Once he reared his head proudly above the waters, then, as he was carried off his feet. it slowly sank again, and the drowned body moved rapidly with the current. Luckily, the horns caught in a projecting bough of a tree, and with extreme difficulty the body of this gallant stag was brought to the bank.

After the first excitement was over, Dick turned to Molly, who, he thought, was looking very white. She had got off her horse, and was resting on a rock at some distance from the fray.

"I have found out there is a farm about a mile off, where we may get some gruel, and possibly a cup of tea. Meanwhile, you must have a drink from my flask."

Molly protested, but Dick was all-master-

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ful for once, and insisted, and so, with one look which haunted him for months, she raised her eyes to his and drank obediently.

Then he helped her to mount, and they walked slowly along the path that led to the farm-house. For once the mile was a short one, and Molly was soon sitting in front of the kitchen fire, watching the tea being made. Dick had got some oatmeal, which he put into a pail and poured boiling water on it till it just made a thick paste, then he filled up the bucket with cold water, and was rewarded by seeing the eagerness of the honest muzzles that plunged in and finished two pails full.

Tea was now ready, with thick slices of home-made bread-and-butter, after which their spirits revived considerably.

"We mustn't wait long," said Dick. "I want to get on to the road before it's dark, and then we are all right."

"I am quite ready," said Molly, rising and collecting her whip and gloves. Mercifully, the rain had stopped now, and thus late in the day it showed signs of clearing. Along the rim of the horizon was a clear

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streak of blue sky, which was widening as the curtain of dark cloud lifted.

As they reached the moor a pale shaft of sunlight slanted over the heather, and then faded as the sun gradually sank westward in the sea.

They had both been riding in silence for some time, when Molly impulsively, holding out a hand towards him, said, "I never thanked you for giving up your horse to me."

Dick meant to say some playful phrase as he just touched the gloved hand, but the words wouldn't come, and something was thumping and pounding up in his throat, and he thought it must be his heart. He just managed "Not at all," and pulled himself together.

"You are very silent," said Molly.

"I am going away to-morrow," he said.

"So you told me; and when are you coming back?"

"I am afraid not at all," he said. "I am so ghastly poor, it only makes me discontented."

Molly looked hurt, and then a shadow of

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anger stole across her face, but she said nothing.

It was dusk now, and the moor was hushed in the stillness that followed the day of storm. As they rode on in silence over the grass road they were conscious of a crowded wild life around them which stirs with approaching night. Strange eyes of curiosity peered at them from the dark folds in the heather, and the moor seemed to be alive with stealthy little footsteps that trembled on the brink of hearing.

When they arrived at the gates of the Dower House, it was Dick who broke the silence. "You were angry with me just now," he said. "What can I do to mollify you?"

"Oh, was I?" came the answer. "Well, make me no puns, and, above all, ask me no conundrums. Good night," she said, "and good-bye."

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CHAPTER XIII

"TO BE OR NOT TO BE"

"Ask, ere the youngster be rated and chidden,
What did he carry, and how was he ridden?
Maybe they'd used him too much at the start,
Maybe fate's weight-cloths were breaking his heart."

KIPLING.

MOLLY went straight to her room, sending word to her father that she should not be down again that evening, as she was tired, a statement that was perfectly true.

Dick's thoughts as he rode to the inn were a whirl. He came to the conclusion he had never had to take such a hard grip of himself before. He was sure he had done the proper thing. What right had he to speak, with nothing to offer her? She didn't suspect, and no harm was done as far as she was concerned, and that was all he cared about.

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He felt stiff and cold as he got off his horse in the stable-yard, and, although worn out with fatigue and the excitement of the day, there was a sense of satisfaction in all he had done.

This was his last evening in the old inn, and he thought a small bottle of Perrier Jouet with the usual trout and chicken would brighten matters a little. He had found a few bottles in Mr. Feathers's cellar that had lain there forgotten for years, and which bore the date of a long-famous vintage. These Dick had reserved for special occasions, and if ever he deserved one, he felt it was to-night.

Mrs. Feathers, as usual, protested she was expecting some fresh in, and was so sorry it had never come, but Dick was resigned, and said the old would do quite well. "Such an easy gentleman he is to please," she confided to the maid.

All the next morning Dick was busy with his packing and making arrangements for his departure.

Mr. Feathers intimated that he was short of horses, and would like to buy the chestnut mare, but Dick said he had just

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decided not to part with that one, but that the other two were for sale, whereupon Mr. Feathers, who had always an eye to business, made a bid, and got them at his own figure.

When Dick was once more seated in the old wagonette, driving to the station, he thought the moor had never looked so inviting.

There lay a panorama of country on all sides of him bathed in sunshine. The old Beacon that yesterday he had ridden over wreathed in tragedy was now smiling benignantly, and seemed quite close in the clear sunshine.

As his vision travelled over the heathered slopes in the distance, his eye was attracted by what looked like a lady on a grey horse that was standing still, facing towards the long road on which he was travelling. What would he have not given for his glasses at that moment! He was sure it was Molly. He pulled up and strained his eyes to see. The rider turned her horse, and suddenly galloped away down into the coomb. He watched her until she disappeared, and then, with a sickening

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sense of depression, he continued his journey.

A week had passed since Dick's departure, and as the days went by Molly had tried in vain to analyse her feelings. There was a sense of restlessness which was altogether strange to her. At first she was angry with herself, and then followed a listlessness, in which mood she took no interest in anything.

Her old nurse, who now acted as her maid, saw something was wrong, and tried to comfort her.

"Is there no colour in the heather for yew to-day, dearie?" she said, and got badly snubbed for her pains.

Had Cyrus known her mood, it was possible he might have got that *tête-à-tête* which he had so often sought; but he didn't know, and there was no one to tell him.

He was quite aware she had just parted with a most particular friend, and manlike in his delicacy of thought, it seemed mean to press her just now with his attentions, so he kept away.

One morning as she came down to break-

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fast, wondering how she was going to get through the day, she found among her letters on the hall-table one addressed with a strong hand, a thing apart among the girlish scrawls and tradesmen's circulars.

She instantly pounced on it (there was no one to see the blush), and then hurried back to her room and locked the door against interruption.

She knew the writing. It was on the answer to her picnic invitation, which answer she hadn't destroyed yet. Eager fingers tore the envelope and then she read:

"DEAR MISS FARQUHARSON,

"Just a note to tell you I am going to South Africa for probably five months. Some friends of mine have started a small company there, and they have deputed me to go and look after their interests. The only reason they gave for asking me to go was that I looked so nice in a top-hat, from which infliction, by the way, I shall escape for a few months!

"I hope you were not too tired after the

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Beacon day. It seems years 'agone,' as Benjamin would say.

"Please give my kind regards to your father.

"Yours sincerely,

"R. M. B. FOSTER."

"P.T.O.

"I sail to-morrow from Southampton in the *Dublin Castle*."

Molly read and re-read again and again. Then she wrote a telegram of two words, "Bon voyage." This she addressed to the *Dublin Castle*, Southampton, and, having sent the stable-boy off with it, went in to breakfast.

It was, perhaps, unlucky for Cyrus he should choose that particular afternoon to call on Molly. He had previously had a long and earnest conversation with her father concerning his hopes and the amount of dollars at his disposal, and, armed with the parental blessing, he went to seek his fortune.

"Yes, Miss Molly was at home," and he was shown into the drawing-room. There he was kept in the agony of suspense for

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some moments, wondering how he should broach the subject. He had an instinctive feeling she was not likely to help him at all.

At last there were footsteps, the door was thrown wide open, and Molly entered.

"May I congratulate you?" said Mr. Farquharson a few moments later, as Cyrus entered his sanctum.

"I am afraid not, Squire," was the reply. "Guess I feel like the one man in the world that isn't wanted."

"Nonsense!" said the Squire. "Try your luck again in a few months."

"Well, I can do that; but I expect the answer is going to be the same."

"You have my best wishes for your success," said the Squire.

When the visitor had gone, Mr. Farquharson rose to seek Molly. In his inmost heart he felt the mission required more delicate handling than he was capable of giving it. He shrank from getting involved in matters which were purely feminine, but in his straitened circumstances he was most anxious for Molly to be provided for. He saw in Cyrus the solution of all his difficulties, and

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he had never contemplated the possibility of his rejection.

Molly was still sitting in the drawing-room, knitting a stocking. She showed no consciousness at her father's approach, except, perhaps, the needles flashed a thought quicker in the maze of wool-work.

"Molly," he said, "I have just been talking to Mr. Potts."

"So have I," she said. "And I am glad he has gone."

The Squire was determined not to lose his temper, so he began patiently to express his disappointment that she had not looked more favourably on Cyrus's suit, and then went on to explain the necessities of the case as far as he was concerned. Molly listened patiently, but there was an angry glint in her grey eyes, and her father felt he was not making much headway. At last he changed his tone, and appealed to her to try and please him in a matter on which he had set his heart. He reminded her that Cyrus was to ask her again for an answer in a few months' time, and would she try and make it a favourable one?

Poor Molly! All the gladness seemed to

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have gone out of her life; there was, indeed, no colour in the heather for her now.

By some inscrutable means all her intimate friends got to understand she had refused Mr. Potts the millionaire, and many were the kindly-meant hints she received as to the imprudence of such a proceeding.

Meanwhile Cyrus bombarded her with candies, and other small gifts she could not exactly refuse under the circumstances, to say nothing of proffered horses and other well-meant attentions.

Her father lost no opportunity of asking Cyrus to the house, and expressing his approval of him on every occasion.

The tension became so great that Molly thought she had perhaps better yield to the inevitable, and so please everybody concerned but herself.

Even a favourite aunt, to whom she looked for sympathy, had written a long letter counselling worldly wisdom; and had playfully reminded her that millionaires did not grow on gooseberry bushes.

Month after month went by, and Molly dreaded the time when Cyrus would speak

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again, for she was not decided as to what her answer would be.

Cyrus had a notion time was all in his favour, and he was not going to run any unnecessary risks. He had persuaded himself he only had to wait, and so the winter passed, and a very unhappy time it was for Molly, till she almost felt she could bear the suspense no longer, and that she must put an end to a situation which was becoming intolerable.

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CHAPTER XIV

THE GOLDEN CITY

"Hasten time! Anticipation
Still is only sweet probation,
Deepening love's infatuation,
Yet most hard to bear.
Come, then, Monday! Do not linger.
Clock, turn swift your lazy finger,
Point the hour that safe will bring her
For my heart to wear."

PERCY REEVE.

DICK had been some months in South Africa managing the affairs of the London Syndicate, and securing options of purchase on various farm-lands suspected of being auriferous, during which time he had learned something of the country, and much of the mingled stupidity and craft of the Dutch farmer.

One day in the Golden City, when talking business "between the chains," a place which corresponded with his own Throg-

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morton Street, a chance acquaintance told him of an old Boer farmer who had ridden in to the city to try and sell his farm, and who was looking for an ardent English colonist as a likely purchaser.

"Usual story, I suppose," said Dick—"no water?"

"Yes, there is water, and that is the 'funny part,'" was the reply; "there is plenty in the river, but no cattle will drink it, and the farmer's stock have all died from drought. This little item he is keeping to himself, and as the river is full he is sure to catch some poor, unsuspecting tenderfoot."

Dick had just completed his work for the company, and having nothing special on hand at the moment he decided to investigate. There was the lump sum paid him by the company for his work lying at the bank untouched, and he was by no means adverse to a speculation; moreover, his curiosity was roused to see that water which the cattle would not drink.

There was no difficulty in finding the farmer, who expressed a desire to show him the farm at once, and then and there

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they made an arrangement to ride out and see it.

One of the chief allurements the farmer referred to was the never-failing supply of water, and Dick on arrival became immensely interested in the river; he looked at it very closely, and saw that little bubbles in thousands were floating on the top. He at once suspected that he knew the reason why the cattle wouldn't drink. At all events, he was prepared to chance it. Of course it was a pure speculation, and he might find himself with a perfectly useless farm on his hands. Then there was the other side of the picture, which meant success; and he flushed at the thought, as the vision of the sweetest girl he had ever known came between him and the coarse form of the rotund Dutchman.

Dick went through the rest of the inspection as a matter of form. The farmer would sell very cheaply, and was in haste to close the deal. Dick was no less eager, but strove to make the best bargain he could, and thus after much haggling it was fixed. An appointment with an attorney was made on the following day when, with

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the help of the lump sum at the bank, the purchase was completed. That night the oft-repeated story of the farmer's slimness made him the hero of an admiring circle.

Now the farm was really his Dick felt qualms as to the wisdom of his speculation. The first thing to be done was to get expert advice on the subject. He accordingly wired to a friend, who was a partner in a large engineering firm at the Cape, who had had long experience in America of the kind required, and asked him to come.

Dick felt still more nervous as he rode out once more in company with the engineer, and he took him straight to the river.

The engineer paused when he saw the water.

"What do you think?" said Dick.

"I don't think," was the answer, "I know—it's oil, and there's money in it."

"So far, so good," said Dick, as calmly as he could, "but I have no capital to work with, so I must just set about selling the whole thing as it stands."

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"Don't you be in a hurry," was the reply. "I know some capitalists who will find the money to sink a well, and work it on the report I could make now."

The engineer was as good as his word, though it took some time to arrange matters, yet when the well was sunk there was no doubt about the oil—there was more than they could cope with. Still more capital was needed, but the members of the syndicate were men of finance, and said it was much too good a thing to throw to the public at this stage, and they arranged to buy Dick out, partly in shares and partly in cash.

As the oil continued, they sunk another well, and struck oil again; then they bought more of Dick's shares, but this time at a higher figure.

Dick had no idea of remaining longer than he could help in Africa. The strain and anxiety of the last few months had left him little leisure to think of anything but the work in hand. He had scarcely realized yet his altered circumstances. It all seemed so marvellous to him, even in this land of surprises and quick fortunes,

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which were common enough in the early days of the Golden City.

He meant, if possible, to realize all his interests for cash so that he would have no ties that would mean further anxiety, and possibly entail another journey to Africa. This precluded the possibility of his leaving at once for England; yet he would have liked to have seen Molly, for, being completely in the dark as to her feelings towards him, the thought of the ever-present Cyrus burnt like a hot iron. As he couldn't leave, he did the next best thing in his own mind; he wrote to her a long, friendly letter telling her that his work was nearly finished, and that he was returning as soon as he could to Exmoor. Of his good fortune he said nothing, deciding to reserve this surprise that it should lose nothing in the telling when they met.

This letter took a long time to write; he was frightened of saying too much and prematurely displaying his real feelings. Many rough drafts were written and re-written before he got it to his satisfaction, and when he had consigned the letter to

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the post-box he felt he could do no more for the present.

He was feeling very restless, so he went to the office and tried to occupy his mind with the prospect of the third well which was to be sunk on the property. If this proved a success he hoped to dispose of his remaining interests in the concern. He found nothing to be done there, however, and he strolled into the club for dinner and distraction.

Conversation, as usual, touched on the shortcomings of the Boer administration in the city, and the daily outrages that went on with impunity. The fact that the robbery of a letter-carrier had just been added to the list of misdeeds seemed to have no particular interest for him; he was heartily sick of the whole thing, and was longing to get away.

The remaining weeks dragged on in soul-tormenting inactivity. He had just made up his mind to sacrifice the rest and go, when a favourable report came as to the third boring. His partners were only too anxious now to get matters entirely in their own hands, and Dick made his own terms for the remainder of his holding.

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He was indeed a rich man, and the sensation had all the pleasure of being a novelty. What his future plans were he was not quite certain. One thing was clear to him, however—there would be no more city work and its concomitant anxiety. The mere occupation of making money was not a pastime after his heart; he had not been brought up that way. His was a much wider field of interest with a healthy capacity for simple enjoyment.

He was not long making his final arrangements, and the day came at last when he found himself actually on board the *Dublin Castle*—the same good ship on which he had sailed from home under very different circumstances less than a year ago.

The first throb of the screw that vibrated through the vessel sent an answering thrill through Dick's pulses, as he realized he had at last started on the journey which would decide his fate.

Small wonder he grew impatient when he thought of the five thousand odd miles of sea which had to be traversed. His nights became hideous with misgivings; once the words of "M'Andrew's hymn"

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came to his mind as he lay awake and listened to the slow-throbbing engines, and he speculated with the ghost of a grin as to how many accelerating turns Ferguson would have given the engines in his circumstances.

The monotonous routine of the life on the steamer, too, bored him till he quite welcomed the diversion of a storm, which confined most of the passengers to their cabins, and considerably curtailed the length of the dinners in the saloon.

It so happened that his regular neighbour at dinner was a Mrs. Sanderson, the attractive widow of a naval officer, and on this particular night she alone had braved the terrors of the saloon dinner. The heavy seas which had been striking the ship aft most of the day had worked up a considerable roll, the most disconcerting of all movements at dinner. In vain the fiddles were screwed on the table—plates and glasses acknowledged no barriers at an angle of forty degrees.

Mrs. Sanderson had bravely entered the saloon, and was making for her allotted chair, when a sudden upheaval propelled

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her at a run to the other side of the saloon, where she held on to the screwed table.

For some moments she clung to her support as though unwilling to take the risk of leaving it. Dick witnessed the incident with some concern, when one irresistible appeal from those brown eyes brought him to the rescue.

Hand-in-hand they cautiously made their way back to the dinner-table, Dick feeling slightly embarrassed with his charge.

At that moment a Portuguese steward measured his length on the floor, together with a pile of plates he was carrying with both hands; this created a startling diversion, and eased the situation considerably.

Dick and his friend decided to dispense with soup, as being too frisky a *plat* under the circumstances, and a small piece of boiled sole was safely landed before them.

"Don't you come near me with that sauce," said Dick; "it's not safe," as the steward hovered towards him with a huge bowl of thick white mixture.

They then decided the next course should be plain roast mutton, as being easy to handle.

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Mrs. Sanderson declared the motion had grown worse, and was frightened of falling out of her chair if she didn't hold on. Under these circumstances, Dick offered to cut the mutton up for her, so that she could eat it more easily. Then he gave her a spoon; still she held on, and the mutton remained untouched; there was nothing for it but to gallantly offer to feed her with the spoon. Then the brown eyes twinkled with mischief, as her short white teeth closed over the spoon he awkwardly held to her lips.

"Little children mustn't take too large a mouthful," she laughed, "and I think I could perhaps manage if I held on with one hand now we are not rolling quite so much."

Although Dick felt he was making the best of the storm, he was somewhat relieved when the dinner came to an end and Mrs. Sanderson asked him if he would see her safely as far as the cabin.

Then she thanked him almost timidly, and, with another flash of the brown eyes, bid him good night.

There was no comfort to be had anywhere on the ship; everything was damp with

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spray, and the deck passages were awash with sea-water.

Under these depressing circumstances he sought his own bunk, and for the first time since he had been on board he slept the night through.

In the morning he found the storm had abated, but there was something of a ground swell remaining to recall the previous night's adventures; nor was this the only reminder, for on going into the smoking-room after breakfast he was ruthlessly chaffed by a gossiping Colonel on his unremitting attentions to the widow. Dick could only retort that he was sorry the Colonel was not in a position to offer his own services at the time. Still, he felt annoyed with himself, and wondered if this Gossip knew he fed her with a spoon. This point he was unable to elicit, but made a resolution within himself that he would take a pull at the ribbons as far as the widow was concerned.

For the remainder of the voyage he was busy trying to put this worthy resolution into practice. Poor Mrs. Sanderson, had she known that the vision of another girl's

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face was haunting Dick day and night, many of his absent-minded answers would have been plain to her, and perhaps then the Colonel's advances in her direction would not have been so ruthlessly snubbed.

As the voyage drew to an end, Dick's plight seemed to grow worse, and the days seemed to drag more slowly, till he was almost feverish in his impatience to have done with the steamer.

It seemed the longest voyage he had ever undertaken, till at last one afternoon the throbbing propeller stopped, and the anchor-chain rattled down into the blue Southampton Water.

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CHAPTER XV

A SURPRISE

"Life is chiefly froth and bubble;
Two things stand like stone:
Kindness in another's trouble,
Courage in your own."

LINDSAY GORDON.

BRADSHAW revealed the impossibilities of a cross-country journey to Withyford, and Dick accordingly went straight up to town, and decided to travel down to his destination by the first train from Paddington in the morning.

On this journey he was too impatient to enjoy the sight of the country, although the small cultivated fields and hedgerows were grateful to his eye, so lately accustomed to the vastness of the arid veld. It was not, however, until he reached Mulworthy that he really felt at home once more. His head was out of the window as the train

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drew up at the little platform, and he caught a glimpse of the wagonette waiting for him, that had taken him to the station only a few short months since. The same two patient horses were standing with the reins on their backs, just as he had seen them in his last view as the train bore him away.

Events had moved so rapidly for him, and he had travelled so far and been through such varied experiences, that he almost marvelled to find Mulworthy unchanged in one single detail.

It was one of those lovely days peculiar to March in the West Country, when no cloud appears in the sky from sunrise to sunset, the high wooded hills seem to reflect the warmth, and life awakes to a foretaste of summer. The rooks were whirling high in the tree-tops, their plumage looking steel-blue in the sunlight against the brown swelling buds of the trees.

As Dick drove through the enclosed country, sheep and lambs penned in the fields were bleating in chorus ; close against the roadside hedge was a sheep-dog meekly submitting himself to the outraged feelings of a mother who mercilessly butted him in

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the ribs, while his head was turned wistfully in the direction of the shepherd for instructions.

It was all very delightful, this homecoming. There was the dear old Beacon of sporting memory; so pleased was he to see it again that, had it not been for the prosaic driver, he would have raised his hat, and given a view-halloo in salutation.

Soon the brakes were scraping on the wheels of the wagonette, and the long winding descent had begun. Yes, there was the inn, and, above all, there was Mr. Feathers awaiting his arrival.

"Mr. Feathers," he said, after the first short greeting, "I want lunch sharp and the dog-cart at three o'clock."

"Lunch be all ready, sir; you be pleased to step in."

Dick did ample justice to the lunch, in spite of occasional qualms of trepidation, which he steadied with a brandy-and-soda, Mr. Feathers's whisky being of a brand that was not to be trifled with.

After lunch he went up to his room and changed, selecting a suit and tie with extreme care; and he presented a very well-

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finished appearance when he took his seat in the cart.

Mr. Feathers pondered the meaning of all this, but could find no solution, and wisely held his tongue.

When Dick arrived at the Dower House, he drove straight round to the stable-yard, gave his cart in charge of a groom, and then, as he pulled at the ponderous front-door bell, he was conscious that his heart was hammering under the third button of his waistcoat.

"No; Miss Molly was away, but the Squire was in."

Dick followed mechanically, and, with a sensation of numbness, found himself shaking hands with the Squire. T' old Squire was in great form, and very pleased to see him. Dick's first question was as to Molly.

"She is in town staying with my sister," was the reply, "and I have great news from her only this morning. She is engaged to be married," and, not noticing Dick's expression, he went on: "The lucky man is Mr. Cyrus Potts, whom I think you—— But, my dear boy," he said,

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"you're looking seedy. Have a drink; there's brandy, whisky. I never have tea myself—old woman's stuff, I call it, and spoils your dinner too."

All the time this tactful old man was sustaining the entire conversation, Dick covered his confusion in a deep, long drink. Then he felt better.

"Now, sit down and tell me all about yourself," said the Squire.

"There is nothing much worth telling," said Dick in a bewildered way. "It is a beastly country, and I was very glad to get out of it."

"It seems to me," said the Squire, "from the paper, that the present condition of things points to war."

"Yes," said Dick, "it will be worse before it's better."

"Now, where are you staying?"

"At the inn," said Dick, "for a few days, and then I am going up to town. By the by," he added, "will you give me Molly's address?"

"Certainly," said the Squire; "here it is." And he tore off the heading of her letter.

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When Dick had gone, the Squire pulled his chair up to the fire, and stared into the coals. It struck him there had been a narrow escape, and that Cyrus had only won by a short head, as he termed it.

In his heart of hearts he was genuinely sorry for Dick, for there was no doubt the boy was hard hit. Had he known all, he might, indeed, have been sorry for himself at this moment, but Dick had not breathed a word of his altered circumstances; so the Squire resigned himself to the inevitable with something of a sigh, and sat down and wrote Molly his congratulations on her engagement to Mr. Cyrus Potts.

It was with a feeling of relief Dick got outside the house; he wanted to be by himself and think it all out. As he drove back he seemed to realize the misery of it all, and what he had lost. Still, he determined to take his gruel like a man, and make the best of things.

Now he was here he had better stay for a day or so. Perhaps Molly would write when she heard; anyhow, he meant to see her in town. He remained three days at the inn, pottering about in a state of un-

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enviable indecision, but no letter came, and so on the fourth day he took the early train to London and put up at his club. Then he arrayed himself in his smartest town clothes, and presented himself at the address in Queen's Gate late in the afternoon.

Nominally he was calling to congratulate Miss Farquharson on her recent engagement to Mr. Potts, but in his heart of hearts he knew he was calling to find out why on earth Molly had accepted him.

He was lucky enough to find her at home. Perhaps Molly read with a woman's quick intuition an aspect of reproach in Dick, for there was something of an answering defiance in her attitude as she rose and formally greeted her visitor.

"No doubt your father told you I was home," said Dick.

"Yes, he did," said Molly airily; "but we had a fellow-passenger of yours here the other day, so I heard beforehand all about you;" and she placed a decided emphasis on the "all."

"Who was it?" said Dick.

"A Colonel Ward, who——"

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"I know," interrupted Dick; "rather an old gossip I thought him on board."

"He is a great friend of my aunt's," retorted Molly coldly.

Dick felt the situation rather strained, and hastily turned the subject.

"I came to congratulate you on your engagement," said Dick, in partial veracity.

Molly slowly bent her head, and said, "Thank you very much."

Then it occurred to her perhaps she was being too hard, and possibly he was really very fond of Mrs. Sanderson, after all, so it was with a more softened tone she said: "I hope we shall see something of you again this season down in the West."

Dick was not in the mood to think of Exmoor, under the new conditions, and demurred.

"Oh, do come!" she said impulsively; "we will all go down in August. It will be the greatest fun."

Dick was not at all sure it would be the greatest fun for him, but he didn't say so. What he did say was, very casually, "Did you get my letter?"

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"Yes," said Molly; "I got it this morning."

"This morning?" repeated Dick; "why, I posted it two months ago."

"Well," she remarked, "it was much the worse for wear—at least, the envelope was—and there was a notice with it, something about being stolen and recovered."

"I posted it myself," said Dick, and then paused. "Of course," he said, "I remember—they robbed the mail."

"Robbed the mail!" echoed Molly.

"Yes," said Dick; "I paid no heed to it at the time, but now I remember hearing something about it when I went into the club one day, but of course I did not think it was my letter. That's just my luck," he added.

Molly could find nothing to say, only the grey eyes looked thoughtful as she held out her hand to bid him good-bye.

When Dick had gone, Molly went straight to her room and re-read his letter over and over again, and then locked it away safely where she kept her treasures.

Dick was feeling decidedly rudderless as he walked down Queen's Gate and made

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his way mechanically to the Park. For the first time in his life he had absolutely no plans, and no necessity for doing any special thing at an allotted time; yet the feeling of schoolboy elation which is supposed to attend this ecstatic condition was entirely absent; but then, schoolboys did not fall in love, or, if they did, the feeling was well under control.

What on earth was he to do with himself? he wondered, as he strolled down Piccadilly, aimlessly looking at the shops; and then he grew bored with the pavement full of people doing the same thing, so he decided to have his hair cut. If he put himself entirely in the hands of a leisurely barber, it ought to bring him right up to dinner-time, and after that he would do a theatre somewhere.

He was about to put this little programme in operation when, above the dull roar of the traffic, came the penetrating falsetto of the newspaper-boy raised to a pitch of excitement.

There were two boys working at a run one each side of the street. People were darting between the traffic to buy papers;

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the boys never seemed to pause to give change, but ran on unheeding. Two or three times the refrain was repeated before Dick caught it; then it reached his ears plainly enough: "Kruger's ultimatum—official!"

"That's war," he muttered, as he read the telegram. His spirits rose rapidly enough now with the prospect of action before him.

He was certainly off with the old love, and he was correspondingly eager at this moment to be on with the new. When our feelings are deeply stirred so that the crust of repression is rudely broken, it is then that the fighting instinct invariably comes to the top. Dick knew nothing of war, with its daily crop of agonies, and the weariness of body and spirit that comes to all in the protracted campaign. He welcomed the idea of fighting as a new distraction, and hugged the thought that the path of duty should for once lead so absolutely in the direction he most desired.

As he turned from reading the paper, the West-End offices of the Shipping Company were facing him.

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He liked the sign-posts of life to point the road clearly ; it saved so much anxious thought, and, in hunting parlance, prevented him making bad turns. The next move was quite clear—to book his passage before the crowd came to take every available berth for months. This he lost no time in doing, and was lucky enough to find room in a steamer leaving at once.

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CHAPTER XVI

WAR

"What was the end of all the show,
Johnnie, Johnnie?
Ask my Colonel, for I don't know.
Johnnie, Johnnie, aha!
We broke a King and we built a road;
A court-house stands where the reg'ment goed,
And the river's clean where the raw blood flowed."

KIPLING.

MONTHS had passed since Dick stood on the pavement of Piccadilly reading Kruger's "Declaration of War," while enthusiasm for the fight tingled in every vein.

Much of that enthusiasm had evaporated in long, arduous marches and in the hideous cold nights of the veld, when no fires were possible, and he lay down in his tracks cold and sick with exhaustion; only the dogged determination remained to go on and fight day by day while life lasted.

Dick had enlisted in a local corps as a

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private, and after months of campaigning and stubborn fighting in Cape Colony, they were at last over the border on the enemy's soil.

Promotion comes quickly when the corps is in action every other day, and the Boer marksmen had taken a disastrous toll of the officers, so that in due time Dick was offered a commission.

Although his apprenticeship had been short, it had certainly been a very active one, and he felt he was justified in accepting the increased responsibility.

They had been fighting a matter of skirmishes for some days, and the Boers had been steadily retreating before their advance. Now they had come to what was certainly a prepared position. Scouts that had come in reported it as a series of entrenchments strongly held, so that the field artillery was called up to shell the trenches for some hours before the inevitable frontal attack of our men.

Dick's company were lying under cover of a line of rocks and loose boulders, waiting the order to advance up that awful hill of loose stones. A dreadful climb, without any cover, save fifty yards from the ridge

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a low wall which was to form their rallying point for a final rush on the trenches—an innocent-looking barren hill it looked, without a sign of life, and the shrapnel swept and searched the ridge without producing any apparent effect.

Dick cautiously raised his head above the wall to reconnoitre, and more easily to watch the shells bursting. A bullet splashed on the rock six inches from his helmet. He hastily bobbed under cover, where he remained. For some moments he resisted an inclination to look again over the wall; an intuitive feeling seemed to warn him that he was being waited for, but these intuitive feelings are apt to grow and become a nuisance, so he repressed it, but this time he took off his helmet, and very slowly raised his head.

There was a fizz and something of a quick shock, and his hand went up to his forehead. "It's through yer 'air, sir," said a Tommy.

Still the shells went screaming over their heads on their mission, and there was no doubt the guns had got the range to a fraction. One of the men in his admiration raised himself in a stooping position to

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watch, but quickly dropped again. It was a moment before they found he was dead. "'Struth, but if I ever get among 'em in that trench," said his comrade, Stumps. "You've got a bloomin' 'ill to climb fust," said Bill Jones the Lawyer. Bill Jones was called the "Lawyer," because in moments of tension he was wont to argue. If he could not find anyone to argue with, he argued with himself. Thus he went on. "Yus," he said, "there's the bloomin' 'ill, and there's more where that one comes from. Climb and bleed, there's your dooty. Then, when it's all over, and there is nothing left of yer but a soup-bone, they'll 'and the country back to the Boers." "'Struth," said the indignant Stumps.

"Silence there!" said Dick.

Shells still whistled overhead; hour after hour the men lay waiting. At last the welcome order came, and they leapt up and scrambled to the attack in open order.

Each one taking whatever cover he could, they came on in short rushes.

The guns redoubled the efforts to keep down the fire on the ridge. There was

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nothing to be seen and nothing to shoot at, only death was meted out freely by unseen hands; bullets pattered and rattled in volleys on the stones. Men were falling right and left; men sprawled, their rifles clattered over the rocks; men spun round and fell; men sank, shrieking in agony. No one heeded, the line swept on, in alignment wavy and irregular, but still something of a line.

"'Struth!" said Stumps, as he reached the welcome shelter of the wall.

"Give this country back! Keep your breath," said his chum. "'Tain't fifty yards to the trench."

"Lor!" he exclaimed, "why don't some one stop the guns; they are going to shell us."

A shell at that moment burst overhead.

"The blind fools, can't they see us," said the candid Stumps. This was no place to linger, and the order was promptly given to charge. Dick led his men over the wall, and with fixed bayonets they rushed the distance.

For one instant the rifle-fire in front was appalling, and as the shells were still

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bursting overhead our own men fell quickly, as many from the shrapnel as from the enemy's fire in front.

There was every inducement, as Bill Jones remarked afterwards, to get inside the Boer trench.

Dick was five yards from the trench, and his revolver about emptied, when a Boer raised his rifle. At that moment Dick received a violent blow on his leg, and he pitched forward on his face. Another spasm like a hot iron went through his body, and then, amid the cheers of the men as they cleared the trench, he seemed to lose all consciousness. His next sensation was of being hurt. Shadowy forms were bending over him, and he felt the binding of tight bandages, and the nozzle of a flask jarred against his front teeth; then followed endless jolting and more pain, and he dimly recognized the white-covered wagon; then all was a blank.

When he awoke again his first sensation was of comfort. He felt the white sheets. He had known them at some time; why had he missed them? The effort was too great to think, and his mind fell into

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vacancy again. As he lay still, with half-shut eyes, a vision of the face he loved was standing before him. He knew it must be just a trick, and if he moved it would vanish, so he was just content to keep quite still and gaze. Then he thought he must have fallen asleep, for when he awoke the vision was still before him, only this time it was bending over him—the same sweet face with an expression of infinite pity. He remembered seeing a large tear start from the grey eyes till it ran into the dark, curled lashes ; he watched it, hardly thinking it concerned him till it fell. That was real, anyhow, and he moved. The vision fled. He raised his head only to feel an agonizing stab of pain through his whole frame, and he nearly swooned.

"You mustn't move or excite yourself," said the doctor; "you've got it rather badly."

"Am I going under, doc. ?" he muttered.

"No, my boy," was the cheery response, "not this time. We cure them everywhere now, except through the heart, and you are heart-whole, I guess. Now go to sleep."

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Dick closed his eyes to try and slumber, when he caught something of a whispered consultation between the doctor and the nurses which was by no means reassuring, but was too weak to be anything but indifferent, and dozed off again.

Poor Stumps was within a mere matter of paces from the trench in which he so ardently sought revenge for his comrade when the last shell burst, and our shrapnel showered down bullets on the sons of the empire. It was true the officer in command nearly lost his reason when he realized the blunder, but that didn't save Stumps; he was struck down under the hail of bullets. His pals soon got him down to the surgeon. There Stumps lay very patiently while his awful wounds were bandaged. He asked that his empty pipe might be put in his face, as he termed it, and in his agony he splintered the mouthpiece while they ripped off the khaki drills.

"Doctor, sir," he confided, in a calmer moment later, "I got it this time; but don't tell none of my pals I'm dying, will you, sir? They'd take it to 'eart like."

The doctor passed his hand over his eyes

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as though in pain himself, and then he pressed Stumps's hand reassuringly.

"An' doctor, sir," he went on, "there ain't nothing in what Bill Jones was saying this morning about it all being given back to the Boers afterwards?"

"No," he said smilingly, "rest assured of that. No Government would live five minutes that proposed it."

"That's right, sir, not live five minutes. Struth, 'ow I've bled," said Stumps, as he viewed the now brown soaked khaki. Then Stumps sighed, and was still. The doctor got up to go. Private Stumps had died for his country.

When Dick awoke his eyes sought something and found it apparently, but his reason was stronger this time, and he meant to know more. There she was, sitting quite close to his bed; he must be careful. His helpless anxiety for fear she should vanish was pathetic. Cautiously he advanced a hand over the coverlet towards her.

"Dick," said a gentle voice, "do you know who it is?"

"Molly," he said, and his mind cleared in a moment, "tell me why are you here?"

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But she hastily restrained him, and threatened to leave at once if he was not quiet. Poor Dick was too weak to argue, and his excitement had already exhausted him; his head rolled back wearily on the pillow. A cool hand passed soothingly over his brow. "You must lie quite still," she said, "and go to sleep;" and with a feeling of infinite peace he closed his eyes at her bidding.

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CHAPTER XVII

MOLLY EXPLAINS

" Wayward as the swallow overhead at set of sun,
She whom I love is hard to catch and conquer—
Hard, but, oh, the glory of the winning were she won !"

GEORGE MEREDITH.

FROM the day of the solution of the vision Dick seemed to take a turn for the better, and after a few days he rapidly regained strength. One morning the doctor came to find his patient so much improved that he even encouraged him to talk.

" It has been a very near shave with you, my boy," said the doctor, " and I don't mind telling you so now you are out of danger; you were lucky enough to fall into good nursing hands, and to that nurse's extraordinary devotion to duty you probably owe your life."

Dick choked something back that seemed

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to clutch at his throat. "Go on," he said, "tell me all about it."

"Well, to start with, you had got one in the leg, and you were drilled through the right lung as well."

"Yes, I remember the leg," said Dick. "A Boer and I were face to face, but I think I loosed off first, only a shot got me in the leg, and I expect I missed, and then he drilled me."

"That's about it," said the doctor; "but when you do mend you will be all right, so thank your stars and get well."

Molly had watched Dick's rapid progress eagerly, and every attempt to question her she had vetoed on the ground that he was too weak to talk. This evasion she knew could not shelter her much longer, and she dreaded the inevitable explanation he would seek at her hands. For this reason her manner grew colder, and she found many ingenious excuses to avoid being alone in her attendance for one instant. Dick was puzzled to account for the marked change in her demeanour towards him. The doctor had told him of her unremitting care of his unworthy self, and her aloofness

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now only doubled his determination to seek the first opportunity to speak.

While he was a helpless, bed-ridden object it was no great testimony to Molly's diplomacy that no such opportunity was afforded him. He recognized he was at a disadvantage, and must wait until he could get up once more. In his present position he felt under her dominion, for what is man without his clothes? So he bided his time, and pondered more and more within himself.

One day, looking back on the bodily and mental chaos from which he had emerged, and probing into the recesses of a blurred memory, he disinterred the item of the tear. He saw it quite plainly again now, and the memory of it was destined to puzzle and even torture him again and again in the future.

At last the time came when he was allowed to get up, being well on the road to convalescence.

Molly had gone out for a little air and rest in the hospital grounds; the hard work and confinement in the wards, the awful scenes of pain and death, had not been

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without their inevitable effect. She looked pale and worn. She was sitting on the long seat which overlooked the sea, and the expression in her eyes seemed to reflect the hopeless distance of the vast waters.

A short and rather faltering step seemed to catch her ear, and she moved her head. Dick was coming. She turned paler as she recognized the inevitable. She knew it was her duty to tell him what he sought to know, but she dreaded the duty.

"Molly," he said, as he sat beside her, "I never thanked you, little girl, for saving my life."

This was not what she expected, and she bent her head down quickly, but no words came.

"Molly," he continued rather hoarsely, "tell me, why are you here? Where is Cyrus?"

"Cyrus is at Withyford," said Molly, "and I ought to tell you at once, Dick, I am going back next week. I am travelling with a nurse who is invalided home."

"Won't they let me come too?" said Dick.

"I am afraid not," was the reply. "As

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your nurse," she added, with the flicker of a smile, "it will be my duty to declare you are not fit to travel for weeks yet."

"But why go?" pleaded Dick.

"Because," she said, "I am engaged to be married, as you know."

"Molly, what made you come away?"

"You have no right to ask that," she said.

"Now," he whispered eagerly, "look me in the face, and tell me that you love him."

"Hush!" she said, "you will make me angry if you talk like that, but because there is no mystery about it I will tell you why I came."

He saw the calm face that had watched over him all the weeks now still more lovely in the flush of animation, and he struggled against an emotion which in his weak condition almost overpowered him. To tell how he loved her, and had lived with the image of her in his brain, and how he had worked and striven to win her love, to tell all, and then to leave the rest to her mercy—the inclination was almost irresistible; only a sense of what was right held him back. She was still engaged to Cyrus.

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Was it a brain-wave, or has science a more subtle explanation? Only Molly knew at the moment exactly what was passing in Dick's mind. She saw the whole struggle plainly, and the grip with which he held himself.

To aid him she hurried on her explanation. "Well, Cyrus was frightfully upset, of course, at my wanting to come out as a nurse, and I don't think I should have come, only father tried to hasten the wedding, to stop what he pleased to term my folly.

"In any case, you see, we were not going to be married for a year, and I didn't see why I should not come, and I am afraid I—I—just came," she added rather meekly.

Dick thought he could read between all the lines of this domestic story, but as she was evidently going back to marry Cyrus there was nothing to be said.

"Has your father made it up?" faltered Dick.

"Oh yes, we are quite friends," she said; "he writes nearly every mail, and Cyrus has been so good. He wired an enormous sum to be put to my credit at the Standard Bank here. Of course I have not touched

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it," she added, "as I have really no expenses."

Dick had been answering mechanically for some moments, but once started on safe ground Molly rattled on almost unheeding, keeping her eyes fixed on the sea in front, which was easier than meeting his gaze.

Suddenly she became aware that his silence was rather marked, and she glanced at him without moving her head. What she saw horrified her; he had swooned.

She laid him gently along the seat, and then darted away into the hospital for restoratives. It was some moments before Dick regained consciousness.

"I suppose I fainted," he said.

"Yes," said Molly, "I blame myself for allowing you to do too much. Now lean on my arm, and walk slowly back." The way was quite a good distance for an invalid, and Dick felt very much an invalid, yet he would not have shortened that distance by one step.

The following weeks dragged slowly for Dick. The doctors held out no hope that he would be fit to go to the front again until, at all events, he had been home.

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"If you send me home," said Dick, one day when he was undergoing one of his many examinations, "I will never return to this wretched country any more; anybody can have it, for all I care now," he said bitterly.

"Well, well," said the doctor, "you have done your duty and something more; it is somebody else's turn now." And thus it was arranged that Dick should go to England as soon as he was fit to travel.

The illustrated papers and other mainstays of the convalescent were to be had in abundance, and Dick spent most of the weary weeks of waiting in devouring them from cover to cover.

There was something about the *Field* especially that was so peculiarly English and welcome that he devoured it more assiduously than the others. He was reading casually the hunting notes, when a paragraph caught his eye which changed his whole thoughts, and opened up bright visions of possibilities.

The note appeared editorial, but it was no doubt penned by some local follower of the sport of kings. It was to the effect

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that the Withyford country, from a real, hard, sporting point of view, was unsurpassed by any other, and it implied that it was something of a reproach that the mastership of the Withyford foxhounds should remain vacant. On the absence of subscriptions it was judiciously silent.

The subscription part was no object to Dick now, and in his enthusiasm he nearly wired.

He was almost certain he knew the writer of the paragraph, and so he sat down and wrote to the Squire a long letter, telling him of his new fortune, and asking for further particulars and advice on the subject of hounds.

This letter amazed the worthy Squire considerably. He had heard a great deal about Dick from Molly, but she had told him nothing of Dick's altered circumstances, for the simple reason that Dick had said nothing to her whatever on the subject.

This new turn of fortune's wheel troubled the Squire considerably; he more than suspected Molly cared for Dick, and he bitterly regretted his own interference.

He read Dick's letter over and over, and

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the more he pondered on his mistake the more exasperated he became. Here was Dick with a fortune—a son-in-law after his own heart. Well, there was nothing to be done now, he reflected. Matters must take their course; only he determined to interfere no more.

There was one item of consolation—the hounds, which years ago had been his, were no longer in danger of being sold for want of a master. He wrote Dick a letter full of congratulations and advice, urging him to lose no time, but to come straight to Withyford when he landed; meantime the new mastership should be held in abeyance.

This letter reached Dick just as he embarked for home, and the glowing prospects set forth in it added new zest to his existence.

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CHAPTER XVIII

THE DERBY

"As merry as a saddling bell."

INSTEAD of going straight down to Withyford on his arrival home Dick decided to go up to town for a few days, if only for the reason that his wardrobe required a complete re-stocking, and so he wrote to the Squire, and asked for a few days' grace. The Squire had written that there was no actual hurry, as he felt the new master was a thing assured. Accordingly, Dick moved into rooms in Jermyn Street. The novelty of London always interested him for a little while; then the boredom of the eternal pavements became insupportable, and he invariably fled again with relief to the country.

It seemed ages now since he had strolled down the shady side of Piccadilly, and it

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was with something of affection he viewed the well-known scenes. Among his correspondence awaiting him at the club was a characteristic letter from Cyrus, full of congratulation on his recovery and return; he also went on to say he was putting four horses together to drive to the Derby, and that he hoped Dick would consent to be one of the passengers. Dick pondered this over for some time, and then decided there was really no reason why he should not accept. Of course Molly would be there, but he must get accustomed to meeting her at some time, he reflected. On the day fixed he accordingly found himself seated on a well-appointed coach, with Cyrus on the box and Molly by his side. Among the party he was rather surprised to find Mrs. Sanderson, and also his old fellow-passenger Colonel Ward. However, he reflected, the latter gentleman would surely take the pretty widow off his hands, and thus allow him to devote all his attention to the racing.

Summer seemed to have arrived with this first Wednesday in June, and the sunshine was bright even in London, so that the

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shadows from the houses were sharply defined across the streets. Cyrus's free-stepping bay horses soon rattled them out of the city into the more open suburbs, and once free of the smoke-laden haze a glorious sky was revealed, flecked with the fleecy clouds of June that only intensified the blue.

Some showers in the night had laid the dust, and the odour of the hedges laden with may was wafted on the south-west breeze.

Before reaching Epsom, now fast losing its individuality in a sea of villas, they turned from the main road to avoid the congested traffic of the town, and then, crossing the course at Tattenham Corner, made their way over to the hill.

To Cyrus, who had never before seen a Derby, the scene came as a revelation. The incongruity of the seething crowd and the lovely surroundings amazed him.

Dick took him down to the paddock, where he had to fight his way through the well-dressed crowd of the enclosure. The other side of the fence, knee-deep in buttercups, cows unconcernedly chewed the

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cud of their reflections in the thorn-fringed meadows of the Durdans.

Far away in the distance was the little spire of Headley Church, like a shrine in the woods; and beyond that, over the dark line of yew-trees, lies a lovely group of long-forgotten downs and heaths—once a famous training-ground, now given to rabbits and rock-roses. Here it was that the great Blair Athol lived and was trained in his giant stride.

In a corner of the paddock the crowd was packed trying to get a glimpse at the Derby favourite. By pressing and peering between the forest of top-hats Dick could just make out the long quarters and muscular gaskins of the great horse, whose record was hitherto one of unbroken victory.

A smaller knot of disciples pressed their flattering attentions round the second favourite, the Minstrel, and it was easier to get a complete view of this marvellous little horse.

In the first glance it was clear he was a full hand smaller than his great antagonist.

"Outclassed," was Cyrus's comment.

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"I am not so sure," said Dick; "remember he, too, has never been beaten, and has sixteen races to his credit."

"These two have never met, I understand," said Cyrus.

"No," said Dick, "they haven't, and it will be a great race."

As the numbers went up for the first race on the card, the bell tolled to clear the course.

"That's my luncheon bell," said Cyrus facetiously; "and it's about as welcome as the cuckoo in April, so let us get back to the coach."

"Now, where have you men been to?" said Mrs. Sanderson.

"We've been to look at the horses," said Cyrus, "and they have given me an appetite for lunch."

"Well, it's all ready," she said.

"Let me give you some of this mayonnaise," said Cyrus; and so the alfresco meal began, merrily punctuated by the popping of corks.

"Well," said Cyrus, "I have read somewhere that 'Sweet champagne maketh man to plunge, and lobster salad is a dangerous

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thing,' but I am going to have a trifle on that big horse when I have finished my lunch."

"You won't get much of a price about him," said Dick; "try a sporting fiver on the little one. If he doesn't win you will get a run for your investment."

"They mostly do, my investments," said Cyrus.

"By the by, I don't think much of the track," he remarked; "the grass is velvet, I grant you, but it is all too switchback."

"All the better," said Dick; "they can't come down and round that corner with no shoulders, and the climb up to the hill will test the other end, so you must have a horse with two ends if he is to win on the Derby course."

Luncheon had just drawn leisurely to its close, and Cyrus had lighted what he termed a handsome torch, when the warning notes of the bell rang out to clear the course for the Derby.

The ladies decided to view the race from the coach, and Colonel Ward mounted guard willingly. This left Cyrus and Dick free to see the race from the stand, and

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they lost no time in making their way down the course.

Already squadrons of police with a rope were walking in line clearing people back to the rails.

"All off the course!" they shouted in chorus, while the din of the crowd and the shouting of the bookmakers clashed in a volume of bewildering discord.

If it was hard work moving in the paddock it was still more difficult to make one's way down the course against the stream of people fleeing from the inexorable approach of the police squadron.

At last they reached the shelter of the stand, and although very full, there was at least breathing-space, and, moreover, a clear view from Tattenham Corner down to the winning-post.

They were only just in time, as all passage across the course was stopped. Presently a yellow jacket on a black horse flashed in front of the stand, followed by a blue-and-white striped one on a chestnut.

The roar of the crowd, hushed for an instant, broke out afresh as the favourite, with the demon jockey up, swept leisurely

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over the grass in a lazy, swinging stride; then followed three or four more in rapid succession, and, last of all, came the Minstrel, whose jockey wore the sky-blue jacket and cap.

A cheer went up from the crowd as the little horse bent his neck to the rein and sped up the course.

As he moved it became apparent from the way he got his fore-feet out that the pace came from the oblique shoulders.

No doubt that extra few inches in front told its tale in the long run.

Once more the brilliant field swept past the stand, and then made their way across the downs to the starting-point.

The crowd was packed like a wall on each side of the course, and the green glade was clear, save for the thin blue line of policemen, stretching away to Tattenham Corner.

"They're off!" said some one, but the bell didn't ring.

"False start," said the man who was watching through his glasses.

The bookmakers availed themselves of the prolonged tension to redouble their shouts.

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Suddenly the roar of the crowd subsides to a hum.

They are off this time, and the plaintive note of the big bell confirms it. A pack of gaudy-coloured silks are seen to sweep through the furze on the horizon.

They are making the pace a cracker, and before one can realize it they are coming down to the descent of Tattenham Corner at a headlong drive.

Only those who have raced round this historic corner can fully realize the severeness of the test, and the danger that the horse may change his leg in the ordeal.

On they come, and the thunder of their hoofs may be heard as they come into the straight, while a thin roll of dust is seen hammered out of the turf at their feet.

As they commence the rise to the stand two horses shoot out from the field. The favourite is easily recognized; he has been lying close to the rails all round the bend, and at his girths now gallops the game little Minstrel.

The demon jockey wakes up his mount in alarm, but the Minstrel is not to be denied, and the battle of the giants has begun.

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Both jockeys have their whips going, and the two leaders have raced right away from their field in the grim struggle.

As the pair approach the stand neck and neck, the disparity in their size appears almost ludicrous.

"'Tain't 'ardly fair," said an enthusiastic booky. Then the cry goes up: "The favourite's beat!"

So close is the race that at the angle at which it is viewed from the stand it is impossible to tell which has the advantage, but the unerring judge at the post is in a better position, and gives it to the favourite.

"Whew!" said Cyrus, "now if I am not glad I backed that other horse."

"I am afraid you've lost," said Dick.

"I know," was the reply, "but I feel I did the right thing by that little horse."

"He is real sand, or I never saw it."

"I guess I can't stand any more races after that," he said; "they might spoil it."

The crowd now converged from all points to see the favourite led back, and Cyrus and Dick took the opportunity to make their way up the course and back to their coach.

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Afternoon coffee was being brewed for the ladies, but Cyrus for his part thought the occasion merited a different kind of refreshment, the nature of which was indicated by the explosion of a cork. He held up the beaker of bubbling wine against the blue sky for an instant, and then solemnly drank to the horse that had lost him his fiver.

After coffee was served the hampers were packed, and the word given for home. Cyrus, meanwhile, was superintending the final arrangements. First, the coach had settled in the grass, and he had it moved out of the rut before the horses were put in; the neglect of this little precaution, he knew, often meant snapped traces and a very bad start. As it was, he scarcely relished getting four horses to go into their cold collars at a walk up the grass hill in the traffic.

If he had never attained great distinction in the saddle there was no doubt he was quite at home on the box. He sat there like a workman till he saw his chance and a clear space before him, when he gave the order to let them go, and was up the worst

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part of the hill at a trot ; once over the tan the road was clear, and the four bays bowled along merrily.

Dick had hardly exchanged a word with Molly all day. It was clearly not his province, he thought, to entertain her ; once or twice he had caught her expression in repose, and did not think she looked altogether as happy as the occasion warranted. On the journey home Mrs. Sanderson kept him fully occupied in a flow of small talk and tender memories, during which time the Colonel obviously sulked, to Dick's intense amusement.

Mrs. Sanderson was certainly in good vein, and the journey had seemed all too short as the coach bowled along Westminster, and then up the broad Northumberland Avenue ; here Dick took his farewell of the party, and thus ended a memorable Derby day for them all.

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CHAPTER XIX

THE NEW M.F.H.

"When the clouds idly float in November,
You're longing to feel once again
The stride of a thoroughbred hunter,
The sweet give-and-take on the rein."

A. O. F.

"YES, Mary, I'll tell un if I meets un there, but I can't hunt about heaven for un with me sore legs." Two elderly sisters of Devon were debating their bad health with melancholy resignation, when their forebodings were broken in upon by the clamour of deep-toned hounds.

In a moment the alarming symptoms were forgotten, and they hobbled down their garden-path at a pace which showed the conveniently intermittent nature of the malady.

The coomb which was so suddenly ringing and echoing with the cry of hounds was as quickly left silent again, a silence that

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seemed heavier for being broken. Presently down the steep came the clatter of flying stones to the galloping feet of two horses squeezed down the path at a pace beyond their natural discretion.

For an instant the huntsman pulled up to listen, and his beast's heaving sides and twitching tail told of the severity of the pace.

"Where be un to?" said he, diverting a jet of perspiration on his face with the back of the hand that held the horn.

"They be gone up over," screeched the ancient dame.

Dick, in the pride of his new rôle of M.F.H., had brought hounds out on the quiet in the early morning with the laudable idea of blooding the new entry with a cub, and this duty he had wisely entrusted to the old huntsman.

In the long chain of woods with dense covers in thick leaf it was impossible to get to hounds or even see them at times, and the puppies took full advantage of the situation. After running riot on the small fauna of the wood in all directions, they had got together, and, with a unani-

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mity worthy of a better cause, settled down on a line which filled the huntsman's mind with suspicion. Dick accordingly started away at a break-neck gallop to stop the leading hounds before they crossed the coomb. In this, however, he was too late, as hounds had crossed the bottom and, according to their informant, "gone up over."

A friendly farmer, who had headed more foxes than any man in the country, for once turned his talents to good account, and stopped the hounds at the top. The farmer had got a view of the quarry, and confirmed their worst suspicions by shouting down:

"T'es a hind with a c-a-a-lf afoot."

"Pretty bad start," muttered Dick.

Then the huntsman turned, and blew long trembling blasts on his horn, that tingled on your stirrup-iron, and crept their way in gooseflesh up your back.

One by one hounds returned with lolling tongues, and flopped down on their haunches with an air of resignation to await the others; only the sobbing catches of their breath filled the silences between

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the wild remonstrating notes of that horn.

"Ye're, Dahlia, big enough for my second horse," added the huntsman as the last hound joined the group, and then the word was given for home.

Dick was supremely happy in the possession of the old pack, and for the last three months he had regularly exercised them himself in the cool of the early hours; for he intended, when he knew the difficult country better, to carry the horn himself.

He had been lucky enough to secure a small house named Oakwood close to the kennels, which answered admirably all his bachelor requirements; and he was now learning that to maintain a pack of hounds brings multifarious duties with it, and leaves little leisure or inclination for minor matters.

Much of his time was spent in the kennels, and although at first he unconsciously sought the windward side of the boiler-house, in time he grew even indifferent to the odours of the cuisine and larder.

Dick was quite aware that his present hounds were not fast enough, and he

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intended to draft from the bottom and not from the top. One of his chief differences with the old huntsman was on this point, the old man favouring the throaty, blood-hound style, a type which Dick contemptuously referred to as a live-on-his-line-all-day-and-lose-him-in-the-dark-sort of hound.

This, no doubt, had been the secret of the long runs of the pack, and the complaints of the paucity of foxes handled.

This reproach he determined to eliminate by judicious breeding for pace as well as nose, and, indeed, the country generally carried a scent. What was more particularly required, he found, was a hound that would give tongue in the thick woods, and all these virtues he was striving to blend into his new pack.

In the midst of his happiness the thought of Molly would intrude at times, and although he resolutely put it from him it returned; and the realization of his loss would haunt him in some defenceless moments of the night.

He had seen her occasionally, but little or nothing had passed between them.

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It was in the nature of a shock one morning, when, on opening a letter from the old Squire, he found it contained an invitation to Molly's wedding at Withyford Church, and the date fixed was barely a fortnight hence. "Well, it had to be," he reflected, as he stuck the card into the edge of the looking-glass; but as that last drop of gruel is optional he soliloquized: "I will have an engagement in town on the wedding-day."

Unfortunately, only three days before the wedding was to take place, he had fixed the first cubbing meet of the season, and as many friends were coming to support the new master he felt bound to appear on that occasion. Otherwise his inclination would have been to get away at once where he would hear no reference to the approaching event. He knew full well the country-side would be talking of little else, and it would be impossible for him to avoid altogether the important topic.

Nor was he left in doubt on this point, for on going to the kennels for distraction the very kennelman ventured to remark that the wedding had been fixed, and that

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his little girl was asked to scatter flowers in the path of the bride, and might he have some flowers from the house, etc.

Day after day people met him with smiling faces, and discussed the wedding with him, and even asked him if he did not think Miss Farquharson was singularly fortunate.

So ingenious seemed the torture meted out to him that in the solitude of his room poor Dick bowed his head in misery.

He was determined to get away directly after cubbing, and his unhappiness was tempered to some extent by the near approach of his first day's mastership in the field. It is those first days that mark like mile-stones the happy events of our lives, from the first grouse to the first kiss; or perhaps the order should be reversed in an apt pupil, but, in whatever rotation they come, those first days are the ones clearly defined when looking back into the haze which cloaks the receded years.

Dick certainly grew excited over his first appearance in the field as master, and the day before he carefully went through the pack, and chose his hounds for the morrow.

The handiest of the young Entry were

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picked, and the most reliable of the veterans were all included—hounds that could be trusted to put a puppy to shame who dared to give tongue on the line of a hare. Although some of the old ones who ought to know better were not above snapping up a rabbit on the sly, they said nothing about it, and the deed being done in silence no one was misled by a false tongue.

They were a useful-looking lot, he thought, and if they didn't stand up on their feet quite as straight as he would like, their middles were all right, and they were good, deep-chested hounds that could stay.

Dick had long since decided what he was going to draw; he had no wish to repeat his former experience in the big woods where the puppies were very difficult to handle, and either ran riot at leisure or else hung disconsolately on the heels of his horse down the drives.

He had heard of a litter of cubs in the open common, and they now lay up in the gorse patches which he thought would be an easy cover to draw. If the puppies were inclined to hunt rabbits, instant satis-

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faction could be administered in full view of the field.

It was raining softly as he looked out into the night before retiring, a fact which argued well for the morrow's sport. His clothes were carefully chosen—an old pink coat for the benefit of hounds, for he knew in their canine minds it is the emblem of authority; boots, however, were not *de rigueur* for cubbing, and he choose a pair of tan gaiters, as sufficiently unstudied for an undress affair.

Having laid these garments out ready to his satisfaction, and set a mental clock in his mind to wake punctually at 4.30 a.m., he got into bed with ardent hopes of sport in the morning.

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CHAPTER XX

IT IS THE UNFORESEEN

"The sound of his horn brought me from my bed."
John Peel.

DICK was awake long before the appointed time—in fact, he had only had snatches of sleep since two o'clock, when he awoke with a start, dreaming he had overslept himself.

His first thought was for the weather, and he looked out into the grey light of dawn to find the grass wet with the heavy dew of early autumn.

Patches showed on the meadow where the cows had been lying during the night; and the breath of the cattle now appeared as smoke in the cold air mingling with the vapours of the grass.

It was a good enough morning for cubbing, with a moisture that might mean

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scent if the sun did not lick it up too soon, and Dick lost no time in getting on with his preparations. Whether it was the excitement or the early hour, he couldn't manage much in the way of breakfast, although his housekeeper, who had strong convictions on the evils of morning air on an empty interior, had provided a most tempting meal.

He was soon in the saddle with his hounds all round him in the yard, and now and again they lifted their voices in a short pæan of praise as they tried to catch their master's eye.

At last all was ready, and the yard-gates being thrown wide open the little cavalcade started out on to the road which led to the meet. Dick found there were already a small knot of riders awaiting him, among whom he noticed was Molly, on last year's grey colt. He raised his hat, but remained entrenched in the middle of his hounds, which precluded Molly from bringing the colt up to talk even if she had wished to.

Cyrus was also there, on a new horse, with which he seemed on very bad terms.

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If the rider had meant to talk to his fiancée, the horse had other views, and monopolized the conversation together with Cyrus's entire stock of endearments.

A move was now made to the gorse patches; the puppies did not take kindly to the prickles until it was borne in upon them that there were rabbits inside, when all hesitation was thrown to the winds, and the whips cracked like pistol-shots in the clear air. At each crack Cyrus's horse pivoted, grunted, and pawed the air in his very greenness, till Cyrus wished himself in bed.

At last the deep notes of an old hound spoke to the line of the right animal, and there was a sharp scurry for the field as a pale cub broke across the common. Hounds were out of the furze in no time and running merrily on his line; down they went into the big wood, and up the coomb on the other side where the cub had got to ground.

The terrier had also gone to ground, and much subterranean yapping and scuffling was heard by the small dismounted field.

Presently the top of an agitated brush

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appeared. Molly saw it first, and promptly seized it; holding it taut she ran her other hand above his back till she reached the scruff of his neck, and then held him aloft.

Dick witnessed her action with no little embarrassment, but in the excitement it was all so quickly done he could only compliment her on the achievement.

"That is not the first fox you have handled," he remarked.

"Well, as a matter of fact, it is," she said; and then added, with a suspicion of archness, "but I have just finished a complete course of badger digging."

Dick could only laugh outright at the naiveness of the confession, and their eyes met for one instant; and then he turned to take his hounds back to try for another cub.

They drew all the surrounding furze in vain; the remaining cubs had not waited, but had made off, doubtless as soon as the coast was clear.

Cyrus, who had been having a very rough ride on his new horse, decided it was time for breakfast; but Molly and one or two of the faithful followers of the hunt accompanied

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hounds to draw the thickets of the big wood.

For some time it looked as if they were again to be disappointed. Hounds drew on down the wood with never a whimper to the river at the bottom. They had just crossed the bed of the stream when an old hound gave tongue, which rapidly swelled into a chorus of confirmation.

Molly was in the dried-up river-bed, picking her way between the rocks and pools, when the music of hounds sent a thrill of impatience through the grey colt. Regardless of everything he reared and fought for his head to be after the pack; there was no time to choose a place out, and she put him straight at the steep bank. He trembled for a moment on the top of the rotten ground, which gave way under his hind-feet like loose sand, and then he fell back with a sickening thump into the river-bed, and there he lay between two rocks with all four feet in the air.

Luckily he just missed falling on Molly, but his haunches lay across her habit, and thus pinned her down underneath.

Dick saw that when the horse attempted

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to rise he would inevitably fall back on her. For a second or two the colt lay and grunted where he fell, and in a moment Dick had his stirrup-leather out, and was twisting it tight round the two hind-legs, and then with one mighty pull he heaved the flanks over and set Molly free, and she was up in an instant. At the same time Dick's feet slipped on the wet stones, and he fell helplessly across the animal itself, which was now struggling and kicking in all directions. Finally, regaining its feet, the horse clattered off down the rocky bed of the stream.

Molly stood dazed for some seconds, and the ground seemed to rise and fall beneath her; then, with a thrill of horror, she realized that Dick was lying face downwards, quite still where he had fallen.

She stooped down and gently turned him over on his side. Then, hastily dipping her handkerchief into the pool, she splashed the cold water over his forehead and temples; the low moan of pain that followed went to her heart.

The situation frightened her. There was not a soul in sight, and the wood was as silent as the city of the dead.

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With despair in her heart she shouted again and again; the only answer to her cries was the trickle of the stream as it hurried over the stones. Then her eye rested on the horn, which Dick had hastily tucked into his coat, and, pursing her lips to the effort, she blew long and loud.

At last there was the sound of galloping feet, and she blew again and again until she saw a horseman coming to her help at a break-neck pace down the steep wood. With a glow of relief she saw it was the good Dr. Pakenham, and then she remembered he had been at the meet.

"I met your grey," he said, "and I have been looking for you."

"Quick," she replied, "he is very bad." But the doctor was already off his horse, and feeling the feeble pulse with one hand while he groped for his brandy-flask with the other.

"Go," he said, "to the farm up over, and get some labourers with a hurdle, and tell them to have a spring-cart ready on the road."

With a pale, set face Molly started off on her errand. Luckily she found the men

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at home, working in the barn. Three stalwart hands started off with a wattle hurdle, while a fourth got a trap ready to await them on the road.

Molly found Dick had come to; the brandy had done its work, and the doctor had utilized the time in making rough bandages and splints to lessen the agony of removal.

"What is it?" said Molly in breathless apprehension.

"Concussion and ribs," was the reply, "and what besides I cannot yet say."

Cautiously they raised him, and only the stifled moans told of the pain he endured. Once on the hurdle with a coat under his head he seemed easier, and carefully they carried him through the wood to the cart, where they laid him flat on the floor with as many rugs under him as they could muster.

"Now, Miss Farquharson, you must go home," said the doctor. "You have done all you can, and I have already sent the whip forward to get all ready at Oakwood, and to ride on and get the village nurse till I can get one down from Bristol."

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"I will send one of these men home with you, and will come myself this afternoon and report."

With this promise Molly was obliged to rest content, and she turned with hurried steps to walk in the direction of the Dower House.

She had been up since five o'clock, and had had little or nothing to eat; the sun was now high overhead and scorching hot, so that she felt giddy and faint, but she firmly refused any escort, as it was only a mile to walk, and set out at the fastest pace she could manage in her tight riding-boots.

Great tears gathered fast in the sweet grey eyes, and the corners of her lips twitched with the suppression of feelings she dared not yield to. Walking almost like one in a trance she went straight to her father's study; he rose from his chair at the sight of her, and then, for the first time in her life, Molly fainted right away.

She would have fallen, but the old Squire was quick, and caught her in time. Tenderly taking her in his strong arms he laid her on the soft couch, and then in his own matter-of-fact way he swiftly mixed a

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strong drink and administered it with a spoon to her lips. The colour came quickly back to her cheeks as he fanned her face with an old Indian fan he snatched from behind the looking-glass.

Suddenly her eyes opened, and she quickly raised herself on one elbow.

"He saved my life," she uttered, "and now he is killed. Oh, father, go at once!"

"Lie down, my dear," he said, "and tell me quietly all about it. Who was it?"

"Dick," she said. "He saved me, and the horse kicked him again and again. Father, go to him; they have taken him home."

The Squire was more shocked than he would care to admit, and so for the time being he expressed his feelings with energy on the bell-rope, till Molly's old nurse hurriedly appeared in answer to the peals.

Having given her full instructions in a tone that suppressed her natural curiosity, he went out to the stable, and ordered the dog-cart round at once.

He gathered from Molly's disjointed account that Dick in any case was seriously hurt, and the grave expression with which

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the usually jolly doctor greeted him when he got to the house confirmed his worst fears.

"Is he bad?" said the Squire.

The doctor inclined his head, but said nothing until he had shut the door; then he went on to explain that two ribs were fractured badly with a kick, and there must have been an ugly blow on the head, probably done with the back of the hoof in the horse's struggles to get up.

"How is he now?" asked the Squire.

"Asleep," said the doctor, "by the mercy of morphia."

"Is he in danger?" asked the Squire anxiously.

"No inflammation has set up yet," was the reply, "and I hope it won't. And now I am going home to breakfast."

"It is rather late," rejoined the Squire; "my lunch will be just ready. Come home with me in the cart."

"Thanks," was the answer, "I shall be only too pleased, for I promised to see Miss Molly after I had got Foster home, and could tell her more."

"That fits in very well," said the Squire,

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"because I want you to have a look at her; she fainted right away in my room when she got home."

"I don't wonder," added the doctor, "after all she went through; but she didn't faint when there was anything to be done, or poor Foster would have been in a bad way."

Molly heard the wheels of the cart return, and just as the good doctor was settling down to a well-earned lunch she entered the dining-room.

She wouldn't hear of his stopping, however, and made him go on with the meal while he told her something of the injury, and that there was no immediate danger. Her nursing experience told her that the critical time would not be reached for three days, and this the doctor admitted; and then, too late, he remembered the day of her wedding.

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CHAPTER XXI

IN WHICH CYRUS KNOWS

"There's a wedding at nine,
And the village bells chime."
Old Song.

NEWS of the accident spread until it became the uppermost topic in the country-side, and even the engrossing interest in the wedding was checked for the moment; for Dick was a very popular sportsman, and many of the inhabitants had known him in the hunting-field from a boy.

Cyrus was deeply concerned at the news, and came post-haste to see Molly the instant it reached him. Molly received him in her little boudoir, where she was wont to retire when she wished to be quite alone, and there she sat at her writing-table, surrounded by photographs of her pet friends, chiefly schoolgirls. It was a

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pathetic little room, and the sweet personality of the owner seemed to pervade it.

As she rose Cyrus took both her hands. "Thank goodness," he said, "you are all right."

"Yes," she said, "I am all right; he saved my life." Then she paused. "Cyrus," she breathed, "the doctor tells me the critical time is in three days, and to think that he may die"—the tears were falling silently now. "That was to be our wedding-day," she went on, and eyes that were filled with tears looked pleadingly into his.

Cyrus gazed, and he read in her eyes the confirmation of all his fears during the last few months that she was secretly unhappy. It took him but a moment to realize this; he saw it all plainly now.

There was a long silence, and then: "Molly," he said, "I have been an awful fool, but I am not quite blind, I guess. Poor little woman!" he added. "He will pull through all right, and *I*—well, I shall be in America before he is about again."

"Cyrus," she pleaded, "*do* say you forgive me;" and she in turn clasped both

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his hands, and her lips quivered in distress as she uttered the words.

For answer he stooped and kissed her forehead.

"God bless you, Molly," he said, and in a moment the door was shut, and the sound of his footsteps had died away down the corridor.

The Squire was perfectly astounded when Cyrus took him on one side, and told him briefly what had taken place; it was what he had long suspected in his heart of hearts, and yet the realization of it was none the less a shock to him.

"I want you to attend to the cancelling of the invitations for me," he said. "I am right sorry, Squire, to leave you to bear the brunt of it all; but I am best out of the way, I feel, and shall sail as soon as I can."

The Squire wrung his hand in silence; for the moment he felt overpowered.

Soon the report that the approaching wedding would not take place set the whole country-side talking. Some said that the bride was seriously ill, the result of the accident; and this view gained credence from the fact that Molly did

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not leave her room, and would see no one. Others, less charitable, surmised that Cyrus had failed and fled to America. Only the good doctor knew, and he held his tongue.

Dick's sound constitution once more stood him in good stead in turning the corner of his illness, but Dr. Pakenham was far from satisfied with his listless condition.

He puzzled the matter out, and came to the conclusion that his patient required rousing, and he determined to administer a mental tonic.

One morning when Dick was lying in his usual attitude of depression, mechanically staring at the wall-paper, the doctor quietly entered his room. For a big man it was wonderful how he could cross a room without the least vibration, whereas the maid who cleared away the breakfast-things made the boards creak, and the very window-panes re-echoed her footsteps.

"Well," said the doctor, "how is the pulse this morning?" Dick with apparent indifference presented a wrist. "Ye-es," hummed the doctor, "a little feeble still;" then he went on casually to remark that

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he had been dining with the Squire the evening before. "Just he and I together, and we talked over old times far into the night. I did not see Miss Molly."

"I suppose," said Dick, and a pale, wintry smile shone for one moment on his face, "that she will continue for all time to be still 'Miss Molly,' in this village at all events."

"Curious thing about that wedding," said the doctor, ignoring this last remark.

"What wedding?" said Dick, beginning to be interested.

"Why, Miss Molly's, of course; you didn't know it was all broken off?"

"Broken off!" repeated Dick, raising himself in bed. The pulse was strong enough now, and the doctor only feared the tonic was too potent.

"Well," said the doctor kindly, "you have been very ill, you know; and I gave strict instructions to the nurse that you were to be kept absolutely quiet, and no local news whatever was to be discussed in your presence. You never *quite* know," he added, "what will agitate a patient in those circumstances." And Dick could

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have sworn there was something of a twinkle agitating the crow's-feet in the corner of the doctor's eye at that moment.

When he had gone Dick did not again turn his face to the wall, but his eyes sought the open window where the sun shone, and looking between the branches of the overhanging oak he could see the blue sky beyond.

Molly continued to shut herself up all day in the house until she was in danger of becoming seriously ill. Under these circumstances the Squire thought it better she should go away for an entire change, and somewhat to his surprise Molly readily fell in with the suggestion.

Her aunt in Queen's Gate was only too pleased to welcome her, and she accordingly started for London on a visit of indefinite duration.

Dick found the convalescence the most tedious part of his long illness. On the days when his hounds had been out he would have the old huntsman into his room to give him a detailed account of each run; and the old man's realistic recitals of the sport he found infinitely more

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diverting than the most polished diction of the accomplished novelist.

When the old man warmed to his story, Dick imagined himself again in the saddle; and the incidents of the run he felt were real, and they didn't always "kill in the open" by any means.

At last he was reported as fit to move, and he chose "Dr. Brighton," as the least tedious of the English health-resorts. There, at all events, he could hack out and take gentle rides on the downs, and so prepare himself for the long hunting days in Devonshire.

The weeks slipped by comfortably enough. Once he had written to Molly to thank her for all she did at the time of his accident, and had received a short and rather formal little note in reply.

Now he was feeling quite fit again he was determined to return home, especially as he had gathered from the huntsman's laboured epistles that the scent was good, and foxes "terrible plenty."

He had only been home for two or three days when he casually heard of Molly's return. The news, simple enough in itself,

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sent a thrill of excitement through his whole being; he seemed now face to face with his future, and he determined to put it to the test. Prudence suggested a decent interval; he could not go and see her for a day or two; still, he found the delay hard to bear. At last one wet afternoon, when he thought he would find her at home, he screwed up his courage, and ordered the cart to drive to the Dower House.

Yes, Miss Molly was at home, and he was shown into the drawing-room.

There as he waited he was seized with a bad attack of nerves. The presumption of his errand presented itself to him in overwhelming force; the silence grew intense, and the pulsation in his temples sounded like rushing waters.

It was only in reality a few minutes, yet it seemed hours in whch he occupied himself in recalling the set phrases he had prepared.

Then suddenly the door opened, and Molly in all her sweetness was standing before him holding out her hand.

"Molly," he said.

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"Dick," she answered.

Then he didn't know exactly how it came about, but he was holding both hands, and Molly's eyes were lowered, showing only the long, black lashes.

"Molly," he said simply, "will you marry me?" and the little head inclined slowly forward in assent till it almost touched his coat-sleeve.

'Oh, Dick," she said, "and do you really care for me?" Then she lifted her eyes to his face, and seemed content with what she read there.

His answer was to steal one arm around her. "There," she said, blushing—"now there is something I want to ask you."

"Well, what is it?" he said, releasing her.

"It is about a lady; and oh, Dick, did you really?"

"Do go on! Did I really what?"

"Feed her with a spoon?" said Molly.

"Mrs. Sanderson, you mean—what nonsense! By the by," he added, "she wrote me from America, where she had met a friend of ours, who told her all about the accident."

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"A noble friend he was, Dick, and I— I feel I behaved so badly to him;" and the sweet face clouded in distress.

"It was not your fault, Molly," he said; "it was just a big mistake, and might have been a bigger one. And she smiled up at him in answer.

"Squire," said Dick, as he entered Mr. Farquharson's sanctum a few minutes later, "can you spare me a few moments? I want to talk to you."

"Yes, my boy; I am very pleased to hear you are all right once more," said he, rising and shaking Dick heartily by the hand.

"Well, what I want to know is if you will have me as a tenant for the Manor?"

"The Manor!" said the Squire in astonishment.

"Well, the fact is I ought to have asked you something else first. I have asked Molly to marry me, and she has consented, and now I want your permission."

"Bless you, my boy," said the Squire, "I am delighted."

Then Molly was fetched, and plans were discussed for so long that it was too late

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for Dick to return home in time for dinner, and he was easily persuaded to stay and dine just as he was.

Molly, however, found time to array herself in a bewitching picture-gown of soft, white satin, and shyly took Dick's arm as they walked into the dining-room.

"There is one thing," said the Squire, as he and Dick sat alone over their coffee after dinner, "you will have to be married in town. Withyford won't stand another wedding for a little; and now," he said, "you go and see Molly in the drawing-room. I have got some writing to do, only don't sit up too late if you are both going out with the stag to-morrow. They are likely to have a good day."

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CHAPTER XXII

THE RUN OF THE SEASON

"Where the laughing stream is tumbling as it hurries to the sea,
There's a stag knee-deep in water, and the hounds be baying he,
And the stag be gone down under, and his slot be give to me,
And the laughing stream is bubbling as it tumbles to the sea."

A. O. F.

In the history of the forest there are often periods when some particular stag seems to lead a charmed life, and baffles hounds and huntsman again and again until almost an atmosphere of superstition grows up around him. This was the case with the old black stag—so called because of a dark streak of hair down the back of his red-brown coat.

When he should have been "going back," by reason of his great age, he still

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carried all his rights on a truly magnificent head.

It was with something more than his usual caution the harbourer set about his preparations for harbouring this extraordinary stag which had outwitted him again and again.

Luckily a storm before daybreak had washed the surface of the ground, and wiped the slate anew for him.

The story that was now written there was plain—viz., the broad, blunt slot of the black stag had entered Barnthorn's wood that morning.

The point now to be ascertained was, had the stag stayed there, and how much nearer dare he investigate and make it good without disturbing the quarry.

There was the slot again, impressed in the mud that had silted up in the storm across the path—the same slot with its blunt toes and broad heel which denotes both age and size.

There were others there, too—the sharp, narrow slot of the watchful old hind, and very similar ones of the young male deer.

In such company the harbourer decided

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further investigation was too risky, and so he crept silently back, and made a wide cast outside the wood to find if the stag had used any of the exits.

These he examined to his satisfaction and found nothing; then he knew the old black stag was inside, and harboured to a hundred yards.

The morning advanced with every prospect of sport. Riders from all directions were making their way to the meet, and Molly had many kindly greetings as she jogged her mare slowly along on the "soft."

Indeed, she was looking her best this morning. Mounted on the pick of the stable, she was wearing a new habit, the lines of which were faultless, while the whiteness of her perfectly-tied stock contrasted pleasantly with a face that was sun-kissed, and had honest grey eyes with curling, black lashes.

Sitting well back on her straight saddle, she looked every inch a "workman," and there was just that subtle flexion, too, in her lithe, slim figure that moved in unison with her horse.

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Scarcely had she arrived at the thronged meet when Dick steered his way skilfully through the crush towards her.

Owing to his having schooled his horse to rein on the neck he attained a very close position without any marked effort—so close that he could talk without being overheard. What he said, therefore, must remain unrecorded, but Molly trifled with the balance strap of her saddle, a movement which necessitates a lowering of the head, and renders a slight heightening of the colour a natural sequence.

Whatever had been passing was abruptly ended by the sudden fitful blast of a horn blown at a gallop.

Dick took his horse short by the head, and squirmed his way into the lane that led to the open, and only just avoided bumping into Benjamin, who was galloping back to get the pack out. Molly also made her way out quickly, and stood with Dick on the open moor to await events.

The pack was taken out to a point on the moor where the tufters had been stopped.

There was just a shade of anxiety on the faces of the field as they watched

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Benjamin draw his hounds across the line of the stag, but it was only momentary, for hounds took up the scent with an eager chorus of music, wild and ecstatic, that made your heart thump; they just feathered for one instant on the line, and then flung away like a flock of pigeons over the heather.

"Forrard!" came the cheering tones, "Forrard on! Forrard on! Forrard!"

"Oh, Dick!" was all Molly could manage, at such a moment, as he ranged alongside her, and settled himself down to gallop.

Molly's mare was giving her no peace, for the vision of grass, grass, and yet more grass under feet made her frantic for pace.

Hounds had just topped the opposite hill, and were stringing in the manner of stag-hounds, yet racing the while.

Horses were lathering and blowing freely. Molly found those who had galloped past her at the start were surely coming back to her now, and she in turn left them behind for good.

"It's terrible soft, gentlemen, hereabouts," said Benjamin, taking a pull at his horse, nor was it long before a rash

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member of the field confirmed the huntsman's opinion; his horse's fore-legs went suddenly down into a bog, and the rider lay sprawling on the ground beyond.

On the heather it was sound going once more, but hounds had beaten horses over the wet ground, and still further increased their lead. "Forrard!" comes the gratuitous advice of Benjamin, for there was no fear of those precious hounds being overridden just then.

As the knot of hard riders gained the high ground they saw a vision of their stag in the distance—alas! in company with two young male deer he had picked up on his travels. Horrible thought—would they separate and the pack divide? Once more the line was down to the water, where hounds had checked for the first time, and oh, joy! the two young deer were seen breasting the opposite hill alone.

The old stag had found the pace too hot, or the cooling stream too seductive, and no doubt contemplated hiding there while his young squires led the chase on in his stead.

There was still time to stop hounds and

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draw the water for the right animal. A note or two on the horn got them together, and Benjamin stood and cheered them as they made it good on both banks of the river.

"G-e-e-t over—over—over—H-i-i-c-k! Michael! hunt him, old man!" The old hound went feathering on trying under the bank of the stream.

Suddenly there was a rush and a roar of hounds, and the great stag shook himself free of the water, and bounded through the pack, sending them flying in all directions.

Wild view-halloos greeted him as he dashed up the rocky bed of the stream, and then slanted his way up the steep sides of the hill at a pace that left everything standing still.

Hounds were soon on the line. Dick set his horse going again at the best pace he was capable of; taking the hill on the slant, Molly and he gained the open moor above, where, neck and neck, they galloped on in silence.

The dark clouds which had been threatening for some time now burst with characteristic moorland fury, blotting out the horizon completely.

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"Where are we?" said Molly.

"Clean out of *our* country," was the reply.

"But *what* a day we are having!"

With heads bent down against the blasts of wind and rain they still galloped on, ever and again catching sight of the pack still racing ahead.

Ride as they would hounds gained terribly up the hills, and that little string of white dots seemed to move over the grass like a will-o'-the-wisp.

Presently Molly and Dick came to a narrow stream swollen by the torrents of rain till the waters washed over the rocks which formed the foot crossing. This was a high-water mark with a vengeance, and they cast along the bank for a ford.

The force of the waters washed hounds as they swam down past the line of the stag on the opposite bank, causing a check while they recovered it. This was a welcome pause for horse and rider, but there was not much time to spare, and Dick was the first to chance the stream, and he plunged in where the bank was shallow on the landing side.

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As the cold water rushed over his saddle the horse seemed to give a lurch as though resigning himself to be carried down by the stream; this was not Dick's idea, however, and a sharp dig with the spurs as the animal's feet touched the bottom sent him bounding towards the bank.

Here Dick waited for Molly, who was anxiously cramming her mare in the exact line he had taken. A chance hole would make all the difference, she knew full well, and it was with a feeling of relief she gained the shallow bank.

They had now a steep zigzag path to climb before they reached level going. In spite of the start hounds had gained it was absolutely necessary to nurse the horses up the steep if they were to see the end of this run. With a lock of wet mane twisted in their grasp Molly and Dick crouched forward in the saddle, easing their horses all they knew.

On reaching the summit one of the precious minutes was allowed for the horses to catch their breath, and they were stood up head to the wind for the purpose.

When they were once more set going,

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there was something of renewed strength felt by the riders in their stride, and the grass seemed to fly faster under their feet till at last hounds were in sight again.

Still the chase went on, with varying checks and fortunes, till an ominous roaring bay was heard down in the deep coomb.

For one instant Molly and Dick checked their pace as they viewed this truly noble beast at bay.

There was no distress apparent in his attitude; his mouth was shut tight, and he breathed defiance through his broad nostrils.

There he stood, with head held high above the surging waters that swept hounds off their legs.

Two of the young Entry, alas! had disregarded the danger of those brow antlers to their undoing; but the pack, not to be denied, forced their gallant quarry under the deep waters, and quickly drowned him.

As the brown body rose to the surface, Lemon, the whip, threw his lasso with unerring aim, and the loop fell over the horns.

Then willing hands heaved at the line

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amid the renewed clamour of hounds, and the long, winding blasts of Benjamin's horn.

"No chance of any gruel in this benighted spot," said Molly, "and my mare is cooked to a turn."

They were stumbling their way home now over the fast darkening moor, and the sad, weird cry of the curlew told of the wilderness around them.

"Are you very wet?" said Dick tenderly.

"Well, the only really dry spot about me is the inside of my flask," was the reply.

"Never mind," said he, "it is the run of the season, and you have got a slot, and I have got a slot."

"It's as well they didn't know," said Molly; "we might have only got one between us."

THE END

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THEY WERE STUMBLING THEIR WAY HOME.

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